Forgotten Ground Regained

A Journal of Alliterative Verse

New Series 2, Spring, 2024

Masthead

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Contributors

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Frank Coffman is a retired professor of English and journalism at Rock Valley College in Rockford, Illinois and founder and moderator of the Weird Poets Society. His poetry has appeared in Star*Line and other literary journals.

O.D. (Duncan) Macrae-Gibson (1928-2007) taught Old English at the University of Oxford and for many years at the University of Aberdeen. He is perhaps best known for his book, Learning Old English: A Course with Audio-Visual CD and Exercises. His article series, "The Natural Poetry of English", (from *Wiðowinde*, issues 60-66) is reprinted with the permission of his family.

Pat Masson (1940-1994), a resident of Devon, England, was active in the Tolkien Society and "Ða Engliscan Gesiðas", a British historical society. She won that society's Cædmon Prize in 1988 for her poem "Dragon-Fighter" (published in *Wiðowinde*, 83, published "Hymn to Earendil" in *Mallorn: The Journal of the Tolkien Society*, and published two other alliterative poems (a riddle and a rune poem) in *Wiðowinde*. She died young from cancer, but her poetry and short stories were preserved in *Nor Bid the Stars Farewell*, a private booklet prepared by her mother for her funeral and distributed to family and friends. Her poetry is reprinted on Forgotten Ground Regained with the permission of her family.

Lancelot Schaubert is a novelist, poet, essayist, and singer-storyteller. He has written two novels (*Bell Hammers* and *Tap and Die*), edited an anthology (Of Gods and Globes), published a variety of short stories and poems, and was the 2019 Artist in Residence for sparkandecho.org, an organization dedicated to forming communities of artists who engage with and create in response to the Bible. He has also published two poetry collections: Inconveniences Rightly Considered: Poems from My Twenties, a collection of (mostly) alliterative poems on themes ranging from love and meaning to urban life, and The Greenwood Poet, a collection of (mostly) alliterative poems inspired by Greenwood Cemetery in Brooklyn.

Donald Mace Williams is a retired writing coach and columnist at the Wichita Eagle. His poetry has been published in a variety of journals and other periodicals, including Barrow Street, Better than Starbucks, JASAT (the Journal of the American Studies Association of Texas), Measure, Pulsebeat, and the San Antonio Express-News.

Donald T. Williams is a former pastor and professor of English at Toccoa Falls College, Toccoa Falls, Georgia. He is also the author of *Stars Through the Clouds*, a collection of Christian verse which includes several alliterative poems

[1] Note: Editors usually mark the caesura, or break between half-lines, by adding extra space. However, in the Old English manuscripts the caesura (when marked) was indicated by a small, raised dot, or *conus*. Therefore, unless the author specifically chose to use extra spaces, I have marked the caesura with a conus.

Forgotten Ground Regained: A Journal of Alliterative Verse

New Series 2, Spring, 2024

INTRODUCTION

This is going to be an unusually long issue. The reason is simple: I have discoveries to share.

The biggest discovery was a small magazine called *Wiðowinde*, published by "Ða Engliscan Gesiðas" (The English Companions), a society devoted to everything Old English. In the mid-1970s, Dr. O.D. (Duncan) Macrae-Gibson, an Old English scholar, joined the Gesiðas. He studied at Oxford when Tolkien was there, spent most of his professional career at the University of Aberdeen, and later, as his family remembers it, advised Christopher Tolkien and the Tolkien Estate about some of J.R.R. Tolkien's professional papers. He also developed an Old English correspondence course that the Gesiðas helped to promote. But Dr. Macrae-Gibson also helped educate the society's membership about alliterative verse. He published a six-article series in *Wiðowinde*, "The Natural Poetry of English", which seems to have functioned both as a manifesto for a modern alliterative revival and a crash course in Old English poetics (focusing on the esthetic effects of rhythmic variation). It had quite an impact. One of the members, Pat Masson (about whom more below) was moved to compose the following wittily ironic response (*Wiðowinde* 68, p. 6):

> *Doubling of dactyls is doomed to oblivion;*
> *Linking of letters is launched with a bang:*
> *All future odes will use only the form in which*
> *Cædmon and Cynewulf cunningly sang.*

Before Macrae-Gibson's article series had finished running, the Gesiðas announced the Cædmon Prize – a competition for the best poetry in the Old English style, with separate award categories for Old English and modern English submissions. The first prize was awarded in 1984. The Cædmon Prize competition ran every two years from 1984-1994, and then resumed in 2011 after a sixteen-year hiatus.

In the summer issue, I will publish a retrospective on the Cædmon Prize and other alliterative verse published in *Wiðowinde*. To set the stage, in this issue I reprint O.D. Macrae-Gibson's "The Natural Poetry of English" and showcase the work of Pat Masson.

Pat Masson, who was active both in the Gesiðas and the Tolkien Society, may be one of the hidden gems of the modern alliterative revival. At the very least, she was one of Dr. Macrae-Gibson's most attentive readers! But I will say no more, and let my readers judge her merits for themselves.

You can read three of her poems in this issue: "A Lay of St. Boniface", "Hymn to Earendil", and "The Last Valkyrie". Her other poems can be accessed from her author page on Forgotten Ground Regained. This issue highlights themes Pat Masson would have enjoyed, reflecting, a deep interest in J.R.R. Tolkien, fantasy literature, and England's medieval past.

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Alliterative Meter
By Donald T. Williams

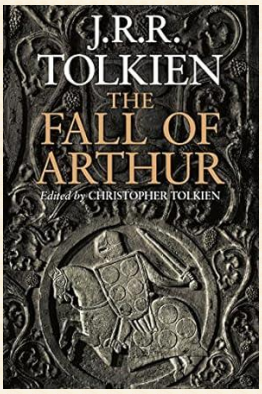
Few were the faithful · fearless enough
To tackle the task, tales unfolding
With letters linked · in lays of glory
As Caedmon the simple · swineherd taught us,
And nameless minstrels, making music.
Long the Loremasters · labored among them,
Teaching the arts · of ancient scops
Who sought the music · of serial sounds,
Letters linked. Alliterative Meter
Revived, rang out, in recitations:
Caedmon hymned · creation's Master;
Beowulf boasted, battle waging,
Made an end · of monsters' mayhem;
Theoden Thengling · thirsted for glory,
Drank his fill · on the field of battle,
Oath fulfilled · defending Mundburg
As Tolkien told us, truth declaring;
Lewis laid · the lore before us,
Declared of lift · and dip the nature,
Told forth the tale · of types truly,
Found them all,· five in number,
Made the planets · march in order,
Placing the pattern · plain before us.
Will we, faithful, follow after?

The Origin of Language
By Donald T. Williams

Taliessin Lectureth in the School of the Poets

Then Man, the wielder · of Words, awoke,
Saw the sunlight · slanting down,
Saw the ground-fog · swelling upward,
Heard the light · laughter of leaves,
Climbed the mountains, mist-enshrouded,
Felt the wind,· wet with rain,
Saw the stabbing · stars in darkness,
Watched the antics · of wild creatures,
Heard within his · head the sounds,
Pulled them forth, in patterns ordered,
Uttered into · air around him
Liquid Names; in lilting language,
Spoke the mighty · Spell of Speech.

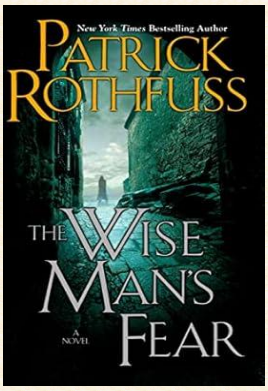
Originally published in *Stars Through the Clouds: The Collected Poetry of Donald T. Williams* (Lynchburg: Lantern Hollow Press, 2020)



Dear Tolkien Society
by Lancelot Schaubert

It would take talent for Tolkien's dirge
of Arthur and all the old knights
of Camelot to receive the called-for response.
its original pages rightly deserve —
the ending of ages, the altar of metre
receiving a sacred sacrifice of devotion
like Old English, alliterate and paced.
It would take the team of the Tolkien estate
agreeing together that greater things
could arise rightly from a ready pupil,
a published poet and pawn of the realm
of the great and varied graves of scholars
who studied the song, who savored Gondor,
who shun Shelob and shake with anger
at the mighty men molten Balrogs
laid asunder in the lofty heights
of the lowest dungeons and the lakes of ice.
It would take tomes of Tolkien's notes
and a steady hand, studying long,
and ready to write a rendered ending
deserved by the start, daring to finish
what many missed, what most wanted,
yet still has never starred on the list
of finished tales, of reforged swords,
that the master half-made before making a way
to the pearly gates and the price of life.
I would take the chance if you take me in.
I would write the end of the ruined saga.
I could give you the gold of the grave of the crown:
Pendragon's poem I dare to complete.

Originally published in the *Tales After Tolkien* blog (guest post- by Dennis W. Wise)



How Rothfuss Writes in our Rigid Form
by Lancelot Schaubert

Patrick Rothfuss often gets praised for his prose, but seldom for his poetry. The irony of this, of course, is that his prose *works* because it *is* poetry. I was the first to write of Felurian's meter, of how Rothfuss's fae creature — how most of Rothfuss's Fae creatures including Bast — speak in meter and rhyme. The more excited these characters get, the more sing-songy their dialect grows, as if plucked from a children's picture book. Felurian speaks in Iambic and Trochaic, yes, but there's also quick lines like "side by side, silently looking up" and "Kvothe's voice broke the stare between them" and "They had deepened to a green so dark they were nearly black." It's his way of writing.

I noticed it only because, as you know, it is my own.

But then he has legitimate poems nested within the work of all shapes and sizes from nursery rhymes to doggerel to romantic verse. At one point in *Wise Man's Fear*, a rather religious Simmon *freestyles alliterative* in what's called "Eld Vintic" in the story:

> *Sought we the Scrivani · word-work of Surthur*
> *Long-lost in ledger · all hope forgotten.*
> *Yet fast-found for friendship · faith the book-bringer*
> *Hot comes the huntress · Fela, flushed with finding*
> *Breathless her breast · her high blood rising*
> *To ripen the red-cheek · rouge-bloom of beauty.*

Now honestly, this reads to me a bit more like the morae in Latin verse, but it still works as an Old English set, depending on whom you ask and their current mood. It's at very least an interesting stanza because it shows Rothfuss *bending* a form twice: once for the culture he's inventing in his secondary creation and then again for the freestyling Simmon who's riffing off the top of his head. This is the sort of thing Tolkien would do: *hide* how good a poet he was by writing bad poetry for uncivilized characters inside a work of prose.

It happens again, near the end of *Wise Man's Fear* we see it happening again:

> *Fast came our Fela · fiery eyes flashing,*
> *Crossing the cobbles · strength in her stride.*
> *Came she to Ambrose · all ashes around him.*
> *Grim was his gazing · fearsome his frown.*
> *Still Fela feared not · brave was her bo—*

The prudish Simmon cut himself off "before saying the word 'bosom' and blushed red as a beet," which of course is another line. Though it breaks the rule of four. You'll find more tidbits like "a full span of days before" and "even the fire seemed subdued when they took a breath" and "you left me dry in the dock the other day."

In fact, it's stylistically reminiscent of Tolkien if it didn't so often fall into romantic lines as well. A quick textual analysis will show that his words, on average, are four letters long. And no, that's not merely profanity, though he's certainly not above using it. One of the characters is literally named Bast as in bastard, both for his personality and I'd wager a golden talent it's also for his family line. But his sentences are often no more than ten words long, his paragraphs often six sentences. It makes for quick reading, but it's the sort of thing one must sweat blood over *after* embedding all of the secrets and mystery and plot and language and worldbuilding.

It's an obsessive masterpiece with the alliterative meter hidden all throughout the thing. Give *The Name of the Wind* a read and let me know what you think at lanceschaubert@gmail.com

Dietrich –Saint Boniface Felling the Sacred Oak

Editor's Note:
St. Boniface was a Catholic missionary bishop to Germany during the late 7th and first half of the 8th Centuries. This poem imagines the events surrounding his felling of the Donar Oak, an important site for pagan worship near modern day Hesse, Germany.

A Lay of St. Boniface

Pat Masson

Winter at its midmost. In his weakness the Sun,
a doddering dotard, had dared to creep forth,
rising late from his bed, to limp a short space
up the hill of heaven. Soon, his heart quailing
he must tire, totter down, turn again to his rest.
A passion of pity · overpowered me at the sight
of the god so disgraced, whose glory in summer
had lightened the land, lifted up our spirits
with brightness and beauty, the bounty accorded him
by the Lord of life, light-bestower,
bringer of blessing. In that blissful season
all green things that grow, grass in the meadows,
herbs of the wilderness, worts of the gardens,
all that flowers and bears fruit · in farm-field or woodland
had leapt into life; by that Lord's power
all beasts had bred, the bull at his urging
got calves on the kine, cocks trod their hens;
men mastered maidens. But for me sufficed not
such cheerful worship, chosen and dedicated
for a service more sacred · when the season should change.

The moment was come now. The might that had cherished us,
the Lord, the Life-Giver, beleaguered by darkness,
ailed now in anguish. From of old it was spoken,
how at Yule of the year · he must yield him to Death,
that quells even gods, and quicken the springtime
no more in the middle-earth, save if men in devotion
restore again life · to the Lord who bestowed it,
to the giver of all good · yielding again his own:
For the life of the herds · a horse or a bull,
of our bread and or beer · for the barley and the wheat
our fields had brought forth, and our folk moreover
must seek among their sons · the sacrifice proper
for the life of man. On me the choice fell.
This was wherefore I walked · in worship and glory
to the place appointed, set apart and hallowed
for the keeping of that custom, as the counsel of dread
that our forefathers followed · we fulfilled in our turn.
Behind me I heard · a high-pitched outcry,
A woman in her weakness · wailing a lament.
Mourn me not, Mother, for each man must die
and better in this battle · where the bliss of the summer,
prosperity for our people, is the prize to be won,
than stretched in the straw, stricken with age,
a dastard death · that is deemed by warriors.

High above men's houses, on the holy mountain
was that sacred spot · the Spirit of all life
deigned to indwell. None could doubt who saw it
that holiness haunted · that hallow of the god,
eldest of oak-trees, of all in our land
the greatest in girth, the ground he overshadowed
broader than a mead-hall, branches far-spreading
the timbers of its roof. Towering he uplifted
his head in the heavens, hearing and conversing
in whispers with the winds · in words that men knew not,
runes of the High Ones;· roots in the deep earth
fixed and fastened · firmly and securely,
moveless in the mould, where mortals honored him;
and betwixt these twain · a twilight country,
a life-haunted labyrinth · of leaves and branches
bewildering the sight. So seemed he in his prime,
noble and awful. Now, the oppressors
Death and the Dark, are driving him hard,
strongly as he strives. Stripped by the frost-giants
of his green garment, his ground-shadowing limbs
bare as old bones, when the blizzards mock him
how wildly he wails, weeping the dire loss
of his vigour and fruitfulness. Not in vain have you called
on your servants for succour: Your suffering endure
but a little while, Lord, and your lack shall be made good.
As we approached he place, plainly we could see him

high on his hill-top, the holy one standing
gaunt as a gallows · before the gloomy heavens
as we climbed ever close. Then a clamour broke out
as terror overtook us: The Tree's self was moving,
coming toward us. With a cry like a man groaning
it faltered, it fell: Into four parts shattered
it lay, what was left of it, low on the earth's face,
riven and in ruin, irrevocably felled,
and the heavens above the hill · were horribly empty
where its form had filled them, save for the figure of a man
who stood by the stump, still and unafraid,
and held in his hand · the haft of a felling-axe
that had struck that stroke: The stranger who called himself
Winfrith the Well-Doer, who willfully had departed
into exile from his England, for some oath that impelled him
to dwell in danger · in a distant land.
So he came to our country, where he called upon our people
to attend to strange tales, teaching a new doctrine,
to the few who would follow him. Folk for the most part
heard him not nor heeded, holding that his babble
was witless and wandering.
When he warned that at this season
he would dare such a deed, no danger had we feared,
but reckoned that he raved, bereft of his senses.

Now we stood stone-still, and in stark horror
gazed into that gap · where our god had been steadfast
since middle-earth's making, till a man had struck him
one blow with his blade, and broken the power
we had feared and fostered. At first for a little while
horror kept us hushed. Then I heard a voice arise,
a mourning moan, as of one mad with terror:
"Winter has won, and the world is doomed,
We can send no sacrifice. Summer cannot return,
No drawing-out of days, but the drear twilight
shall linger and lengthen, the light and the comfort
fade still and falter · until they fail at the end.
Never growth, never green, never grain for the reapers,
but dearth and darknes, and death unescapable
with no god to be our guardian." Grim answered another:
"And all the work of this wizard, this wanton destroyer:
Shall the foeman go free, fleering and gloating over
his harvest of harm? Have at him! Kill him!
Though all vows are now vain, let one victim and the last
blacken with poured blood · the bole that he has severed
and be the first to feel · the fate that he has called down!"
Not a man of us moved. Mighty as was our anger,
no weapon was drawn, for the world as we had known it
was shattered in the shock, all sureness was gone,
nor were men of one mind. Many there were who reasoned,
the Life-Lord being lost to us, his laws were unmade
that would call on us to kill · the causer of our ruin.
Let him wend where he would. What worth to us now,
when the deed was done, were the death of the destroyer?

Boldly Boniface · braved our anger,
flinched not nor fled, but faced our hatred
with will unwavering. Watching from his standpoint
he beheld and heard us · hanging back irresolute
without strength to strike him. Striding towards us
he clearly declared · his claim to victory.
"Look now where it lies, brought low and abolished,
the wood that you worshipped! To ward you from harm
you prayed and implored it, paying it in men's blood
the fee of your fears, that had not force in itself.
to stave off from its stem · the steel of an axe-blade.
False and unfounded · was the fear that tempted you
to such devilish deeds, death of the innocent,
neighbours and kinsmen · needlessly slaughtered.
Be free now from fear! Have faith and believe
That Life's true Lord · is a loving father,
granting ungrudgingly · the gifts of the harvest
from his unfailing fullness. He enforces no price,
having need of nothing, who is nature's source,
and holds in his hands · both the heavens and the earth.

Some welcomed his words: women for the most part,
mothers and maidens · whose menfolk in past years
had been given to the god. Their grief-wounded hearts
sickened of sacrifice, sought not nor cared for
a proof of his promises. The prudent, and the desperate,
looked now for leadership,· to the lord of our people,
cunning in counsel, for the course we would follow
was his duty to deem · in doubtful matters.
He wielded his word-hoard: "As to whether this deed
was ill-done or well done, I am unable to tell,
nor what fate shall befall us · who must fail to render
what men have deemed to be due
since the days of our forefathers.
When a carle is killed · the custom has been ever
that the heirs that live after him · are in honour bound
to further the feud, for father and brother
taking violent vengeance · as virtue demands.
If the tales speak true · the tree that lies slaughtered
was the guise of a god; the grievance against his slayer,
the feud for his felling · falls then to his own kind.

Mortals in such matters · meddle at their peril!
And what if the words · of this Widsith be true,
And the Lord that he looks to, who laid him the task
Of wreaking his wrath · on a rival for our worship
is the wielder of the worlds? What woes shall they suffer
who by force offend · against his faithful servant?
It were wise to wait, watching the outcome,
and see if the spirit-world · send their own vengeance,
bring ruin on the ravager; or raise to life again,
unharmed and whole, the holy oak-tree
in proof of their power; or by portent or sign
grant us some guidance · to what were good for us to do.
Or if Boniface abide, blessed with fair fortune,
And the seeds that must be sown · with no sacrifice offered
as in the years of yore, still yield us a harvest,
we may tell by such tokens · that truth is in his claim
that his god is the greater, and it were good for our people
to listen to his lore · and learn the new customs.
Hold we our hands then · from hasty actions
that may bring us to bale, let us bide our time.
Leave Weird to her work, for her will is more powerful
than any mind of man · or might of the gods."
Duly did we therefore · what he deemed to be best,
and the canniest course. Some carped at this judgment
that harmed not the hated one; yet they harkened my voice.
For I, who of all men · was most angered at heart,
spoke for his sparing. It was to spill my own blood,
a life that was laid down · loyally and freely,
this company had come there, not in cold despair
and mirthless mockery, to mangle the carcase
of a faithless foe · beside a fallen tree-trunk.

We left him aloft there, lone on the summit,
as we wandered away; and I walked down the hindmost,
on feet that felt · as if fixed on backwards
as we traced out in terror · a track forfended
where my weird had not willed · I should walk again ever.
Coming among cottages, I cowered away furtively
to shelter in some shippon, shrank from men's dwellings
lest harm should haunt · the house roof that covered me,
or folk at fireside, affrighted at sight of me,
drive me from their doors, who was a dead man by right.
Yet there came to me kinsfolk; they kindly and welcoming
led me back to lodge with them, to the life I had thought ended
when my doom was dealt to me, that duty now lost.
So I moved among men, and made as if to live again,
in the white-pale winter-gloom · that wanly spread over
days that should not have dawned for me,
and I dared not believe in them.
It seemed, even so, that the sun's hours grew more,
Or at least were no less, though lowering cloud-banks
concealed his setting · and made secret his rising.

Hymn to Earendil
Pat Masson

All hail Eärendil · for Elf-folk and Mortal-kind
sent once to intercede, seeking for grace,
help against hell-powers, from the holy Valar,
Lords of the West; launched from Middle-Earth
into darkness and dread, driven by storm,
till you attained to Tirion, told them your errand
from the people oppressed. With their prayers you were freighted,
their tears and their need, in that time of evil.
Now, a messenger once more, to Men and Elven-kin,
you heralded a new hope. On high in the star-region
the vision of Vingilot, by Varda made glorious,
outshone all the stars, the ship of Gil-Estel.
And still even yet, through all the years innumerable,
your brow hallowed · with the bright rays
of the Jewel of Fëanor, as on journeys beyond the world
you come and go, then, carrying the tidings
that the Children in their need · are never forsaken
by the Powers of Good, appears in the twilight
the Silmaril, the signal, the symbol of rescue
to Men in Middle-Earth · whenever Morgoth's legacy
of strife and deceit · grows strong again in Arda;
that when evil seems over-strong · in our age of the world,
our hope may rekindle, beholding in your beacon,
still lovely and living, the light of the Two Trees.
All hail Eärendil · most excellent of stars.

The Last Valkyrie
Pat Masson

... and here there are witches and Valkyries ...
— Wulfstan, Address to the English, A.D. 1014
... the gods ... flow in and out of one another like eddies on a river ...
— C.S. Lewis, Till We Have Faces

Woman, by her weird lured,
waiting stands, for the land's
king, so called, and his long
craft, wading deep laden.
With fighting men freighted,
Forth they sailed to northward;
Come to coast at Hastings,
Keen and armed to do harm.

Maid she has lived, has loved
the lore only of war;
wælcyrige, weaves with skill
war-men's doom on the loom.
When she heard her liege-lord
lay in need of such deeds,
her mind was, might to lend,
making spells for his sake.

Runes she wrote, but in vain,
Wrought not all as she thought
but stopped, her spell stilling,
standing idle-handed.
A sweven, by the god given,
grants her to view truly
her king' fated future,
nor fight against Weird's might.

Harold felled she beholds:
hoar apple-tree – nay, more –
in a shrine her folk shun
is shown a tale well-known:
a god given to be dead
greets the king at meeting,
welcomes him to Wælheall,
worthily slain on earth.

Knowing the aid needed
now, that fate would allow,
manlike rode the maiden
in mail, her brand handling.
That hard ancient order's
arts are now departed;
the last lies at Hastings
with her lord, slain with sword.

Pat Masson's Notes for "The Last Valkyrie"

Metre: derived from (an inadequate knowledge of) Drottkvætt, the Old Norse court metre

Line 11: wælcyrige = Valkyrie

Line 12: Cf. Njal's saga, ch. 157, in which before the battle of Clontarf Valkyries are seen weaving on a loom with men's heads for weights and human intestines for weft and warp.

Line 21: sweven = vision

Line 26: hoar apple-tree -- Worcester Chronicle entry for 1066.

Lines 27-32: Cf. (1) The legend of the image of the crucified Christ bowing its head to Harold as he prayed before the Battle of Hastings; (2) Heimskringla, Ynglinga Saga, ch. 10: "The Swedes believed that (Odin) often showed himself to them before any great battle. To some he gave victory; others he invited to himself; and they reckoned both of these to be fortunate."

Line 31: Wælheall = Valhalla

Originally published in ***Mallorn, Journal of the Tolkien Society***, 14, p. 32

I Find the Naiad's Place, and Mine

Ted Charnley

My home was here, the place that I held,
claimed by right of my hand.
Of each copse, creek and crest I surveyed,
none were beyond my command.

Donning my denim armor one day
and my sharp-edged blade of steel,
I started my rounds but my steed was stopped
where a swamp ensnared its wheels.

Forging on foot, I found my way
through the cattails and tangled brush.
By hacking and slashing, my slow assault
came to a clearing too lush.

Grasses too green? Water that gurgled,
cool without quenching my thirst?
I would rather no respite or rest, compelled
to find the source of it first.

So I sallied upstream to search its course,
slipping on moss-covered rock.
My blade and its bite went bootless there
when mosquitoes swarmed amok.

Editor's Note

This is an alliterative ballad. That is, it combines systematic alliteration with a version of ballad meter (alternate tetrameter/trimeter lines, rhyming on the 2nd and 4th lines of each 4-line stanza.) For the purposes of comparison, check out other alliterative ballads like Kipling's Quaeritur.

This is not, however, a literary ballad. It is a folk ballad, filled with echoes of older English rhythms. The result has something of the feel (though not the meter) of Icelandic *rimur*, which also deploy alliterative lines in rhyming stanzas – see, for instance, Jonas Hallgrimsson's Lay of Hulda.

The rhythm is fundamentally accentual -- strong stresses are counted, but the number of unstressed syllables varies. The first and third lines of each stanza can be analyzed as traditional long lines (paired half-lines joined by strong-stress alliteration). The second and fourth lines sometimes alliterate, but they always rhyme. Where the alliteration is most consistent, as in the following stanza, the poem approximates one of the traditional Old Norse meters -- ljóðaháttr, or chant meter, which may in fact be one of the historical sources from which folk ballads derived.

Grasses too green? Water that gurgled,
cool without quenching my thirst?
I would rather no respite or rest, compelled
to find the source of it first.

Drenched, bedraggled, but drawn on ahead
as I followed the run of that brook,
I'd go where its gurgles grew into song.
It beckoned, or maybe it took.

At the foot of a hill I beheld its head,
and approached with care from below.
A sprite in a spring appeared at the source!
Watercress draped her flow.

The laurel hedges that hid her home
failed to hide her grace.
As she dallied and danced her dance for me,
I was transfixed by her face.

I stood there stunned, then sank to my knees,
dreading that holy maid.
I prayed she'd pardon a trespassing pest
for the breach of her sylvan glade.

To silence my babble, she softly spoke
of a way she might be pleased:
"This place and its fields were my fief before,
mine are the lands you seized."

"You, my tenant pro tem may attend,
serving and guarding my needs.
In turn, I will bless your biting blade
and release your metal steed."

A prize from my pockets would seal our pact;
an offering made, of sorts.
From the bed of the brook I'd brought some jewels,
pieces of milky quartz.

She took them and nodded, that nameless nymph;
it was time to leave her there.
Steps in return were simpler and swift,
forgetting the how and where.

Was it a dream – all daring and dance?
Detail fades and blurs.
I had held my home and behest as my own,
but I and they are hers.

The Battle of the Bards
by Frank Coffman

Purported "Find" of An Ancient Sonnet

First sonneteer, Giacomo da Lentini (fl. early 13th c.), almost certainly the author of a recently discovered ancient sonnet. It is in a manuscript that has the signature "Giacomo" at the bottom. Interestingly, it seems to be about a reported poetry contest that occurred in York, England, in the 10th c. A.D. in a tale told by an Englishman traveling through Sicily in the 13th c. whom Giacomo had met. The contest was between an Old English scop and an Old Norse "skald": that happened spontaneously in a marketplace in Yokd, then in the "Danelaw," the region of northwest England chiefly settled by Danish Vikings.

NOTE: The renderings into Modern English approximations of Middle English, Old English, and Old Norse forms that follow were done by Sir Daniel Francis Chapman, KBE, FRSL,VC, Merton Professor of English Language and Literature, Merton College, Oxford. Sir Daniel also put the original Medieval Italian sonnet [likely da Lentini's] into Modern English verse.

"The translation into Modern English that follows attempts to keep Giacomo's rhyme scheme—*considered by scholars to be the original form of the sonnet* (a Sicilian Octave and Sicilian Sestet ABABABAB CDCDCD —rather than the later Italian Octave ABBAABBA and its use of other sestet forms: CDECDE or CDCCDC).

The form seems to have developed from the 8-line Strambotto, used as the "octave," to which the "sestet" of six lines on two different rhymes was added by Giacomo."

I met a traveler from England's Northern Land
Who told the story of an ancient song contest.
Two poets vied to get the upper hand,
To demonstrate whose forms and skills were best,
To prove whose prowess, who—with great command
Of word-hoard and song-craft—was most blessed.
A Norse skald and a Saxon scop did stand
And, line by line, astounded all the rest.

Many folk gathered in York's market square—
The legend says three hundred years ago! —
No longer at war, the Vikings and Saxons there
Many words of the other's language they did know.
So, when the bardic battle of this pair
Began—all folk were awed by such a show.

—(Likely) Giacomo da Lentini (ca. 1225 A.D.)

Editor's Note

The conceit Frank Coffman applies here -- a historical discovery as a framing device -- has deep roots and is a favorite of alliterative poets (See, for example, Benjamin John Peter's poem, Sigurd's Lament, or Joe R. Christopher's poem sequence attributed to "Nat Whilc" in Mythic Circle #28, p. 41).

Alliterative Revival (fragmentary) Versions of the Contest (ca. 1370 A.D.)

"This account of a contest between skald and scop, as attested in the recently discovered sonnets of Giacomo da Lentini, seems, almost certainly, to be the same contest as recounted in another newly discovered fragmentary poem from the Alliterative Revival Period in England (1350-1500 A.D.). Amazingly, one full stanza remains, including a bob-and-wheel rhymed ending. But the fragment ends before we find any details of the contest."

The day broke. Bright dawn brought the dark's death.
Many good folk gathered in the great marketplace.
That morn at the market folk were most amazed.
two singers: Danish skald and Saxon scop—
with words as weapons waged war most strange,
voicing the challenge, vied he of Viking blood
taunting the tall Saxon to the test to agree.
Undaunted, the duel was duly accepted,
and battle began between the two singers.
Each claimed the other not as able at song,
unlocking wondrous wealth of his own word-hoard.
Back and forth, in a flurry, fought those two,
with well-chosen words and wondrous song;
both Dane and doughty Saxon defended well
their prowess at poetry, powerful to hear.
Those two
in brave voice did unfold,
the stories they well knew—
their people's tales retold,
in song the whole day through.

The haughty Dane was hight ...

[here the fragment ends]

*Another Account of the "Battle of the Bards"

"*From a palimpsest, discovered on one fading vellum page of Text F of a version of *Piers Plowman* (ca. 1380). There is some debate about whether the analogous *Piers Plowman* version was composed by William Langland, but the style of this newly exposed stanza has been analyzed by stylometricists and is believed to be Langland's work."

Many a year ago in days long of yore,
the tale is told of two master minstrels.
A pagan poet and a Christian proud and good
had a war of words—a wonder to behold.
A merry market one morn was full of many folk.
It occurred in Old York (after Alfred the good king
defeated the Danes in dire battle at Ethandune.
He was a holy man and had Viking Guthrum swear
to go the way of God— give up his pagan ways.).
According to the account, the Dane addressed the scop,
"Think thou art skilled in song? So, let us find
whether my wordcraft or thine weathers a test.
for I am a master of measures, my memory full
of Northern narratives, not to be lost,
of Wyrd and of warriors, and weapons magical,
how the old gods and heroes, have not faded."
"Your challenge at chanting, I choose to accept,"
the Saxon scop answered with sonorous voice.
"I deem I am adept in your Danish tales,
as well as my own that honor the one God.
Both pagan and pious poems I can ply."
And so, there began a battle most brave,
those two tale-tellers, taking turns.
First skald, then scop—and so went the day.
each earning great awe from the assembled folk—
The skald using several song modes of the Norse;
the scop well-skilled in the short Saxon lines.
At dusk, they decided to deem it a tie.
Both bards had sung bravely, befitting their creeds.
The Dane was soon to depart for his dear home
across the broad ocean, again over the sea.
The Saxon's fame spread, of song-craft the Master,
praised for his prowess, proven that day.

Recovered from an Even Older Manuscript

"Amazingly, some of the actual "Battle of the Bards" has been preserved. In a recently discovered MMS, found in the excavation of the cellar of an ancient tavern in York,

A few parchment pages of what seems almost certainly to be a transcript of the poetic contest have been preserved, although there are many gaps in the account and many lines that are unreadable. The account is certainly from memory and not actual transcription. But, as Milman Parry and Albert B. Lord have given substantial evidence in their seminal work, *The Singer of Tales*, memories were more finely "honed" in those days (and in some regions still powerfully illustrated by 'tale singers')".

THE PAGAN SKALD
Unwelcome Guest

(fragment of one of the pagan's "turns" in the contest, But reinforces the notion of a Norse origin of the *Beowulf* story)

(in Malahattr — "*Speech Measure*")

Grim and ghastly / Grendel went hunting.
Man's blood the awful brew / that beckoned as drink;
man's flesh the grisly feast / he favored and sought.
Dire was that demon / dreaded by all.

Wending through wild wood / he wound his way.
to the Hall of Heorot / where the hart's head
hung high in the rafters / with heroes around,
boasting of bravery, / their blood soon to flow.

Merry was the meadhall; / music was playing;
the scop was singing / a song of the brave ones
of old chosen by Odin / to go out of our world
to vie in Valhalla / in valor eternal.

Just then—the beast burst / through the broad doorway,
made morsels of men / at the meadbench nearest.
then took away two / for his terrible meal—
back out to the blackness / one more blooded night.

THE CHRISTIAN SCOP

Most wicked Wyrm · warded his hoard
Fafnir the fierce · firedrake most fell.
Many the mighty · man who had fallen
dead by this drake's · dread fiery breath.
Leaving his hoard · he harried the land.
Fafnir, the fierce wyrm · flew without fear
over farm and fort · with flaming breath,
setting ablaze · both burg and hamlet,
plight of the people, · plague of the land,
wreaking havoc, · having his way,
killing both men · and kine afield.

Fateful his flight, · fiend bred in Hell.

Sigurd was stalwart, · the son of Sigmund,
yet reared by Regin · the renowned smith,
a dwimmer dwarf · who dastardly planned
Sigurd's sword to use · in slaying Fafnir,
the drake most dread, · deemed immortal.
That scoundrel had schemed · Sigurd to murder
if succeed he should · in slaying the drake,
if the beast's bane · he proved to be,
then take the treasure · terror-wyrm's hoard.

Unknowing, Sigurd agreed · the attempt to make.
A perilous plan · that proved quite good:
The great sword Gram · gleaming again,
remade by Regin, · ready that brand.
Sigurd by stealth · would sit in a pit,
crawl into a crevice · the creature must pass.
From beneath, he'd bury · that blade of fame
in heart of the Hell-beast · as He passed above.
As had been hoped, · the hero was right.
The wyrm wended · his way along.
above the atheling · and over the pit.
Sigurd with sword · swiftly did strike.
The blade's bite · in the beast's belly
made black blood gush, · the bold one drenching.

Fafnir, the fire-drake, · before he died,
gave a great warning. "No good will come.
You may take my trove · but the treasure is cursed."

Regin cut from the creature · his cruel heart,
bade Sigurd broil it. · Boldly the youth
heated the heart · heeding those words.
He touched it to test · with tip of finger.
pierced with pain, · he put it to mouth.
Sudden, his hearing sense · sharpened so keen,
that the bold warrior · birdsong could hear
and understand. Awesome that skill!
Then a little bird · "Listen," did say.
"The dwarf means your death! · Danger is near!"
Then Sigurd was swift. · Sword sought more blood.
Cruel Regin, the culprit · swiftly he killed.
Then took for himself · the dragon's treasure.

THE PAGAN SKALD
(*in Fornyrðislag — "Old Verse"*)

Ragnar Loðbrok / ruler mighty
killed by Ella, / King of the English
who put the Prince / in a pit of snakes,
venomous vipers— / all viewed by the foe.

Ragnar was ready. / Reveled the lord:
"With Odin and others— / all who died bold—
tonight will I toast / and tell my tale,
viewing Valhalla, / victory mine.

"I'll hail with heroes / heaven's All-Father.
Freed by this fate, / fearless I go.
Strong are my sons, / soon to avenge me,
an army abroad / over England's land.

"Grown great in number, / gleaming in mail,
helmeted host / having its way.
Ella and the English / earned this loss—
My sons will sow / swiftest vengeance.

"The flag of the foe: / field of dark green,
white horse, will wilt / when my sons come.
All this I see— / even though I die.
My blue eyes are blind, / but all this I see."

THE CHRISTIAN SCOP
(in which, perhaps, we find the scop's name)
Aðelstan's Hymn*

"Now should we praise · the Power of Heaven,
Lord of all Lands, · Leviathan's bane.
Three-personed God · the Great Creator.
He sent his Son · our sins to conquer.
The roof of Heaven · the Holy Maker
set over all · our wondrous sky,
made fertile the Earth · for fields of grain,
made mountains and seas, · so He was moved.
Over this Mid-Earth · His Majesty rules.
All should praise Him. · Aðelstan also
Wonder-Father's · work will praise.

*The reader will note the several similarities to Caedmon's Hymn. Perhaps this indicates nothing more than the frequent use of "stock lines" among the scops. One might conjecture that Aðelstan (if that is, indeed, the scop's name in this passage), might have known or been influenced by Caedmon [himself legendary, an illiterate cowherd according to Bede's account].

The Natural Poetry of English

Dr. O.D. (Duncan) Macrae-Gibson[2]

1. Principles

We look for two things in what we call poetry, an imaginative use of words, and a regular pattern of sounds. The first comes out of the natural resources of the language; but the second, in what we think of as normal English poetry, is a separate scheme to which the language must be made to fit – English does not naturally fall into a regular pattern of syllables, or a linking by rhyme on the end syllables of sections of the pattern. Such patterns were, in fact, not developed in English, but imported from French.

There is, though, a natural patterning of sounds into which English does readily fall, and for centuries it supplied the basis for a form of poetry natural to the language. It is based not on syllable but on stress. English has never paid much attention to exact numbers of syllables, freely running them together or slurring them out of existence in normal rapid speech, but it does tend, whenever it gets emphatic, to a regular beat of stresses (with varying numbers of unstressed syllables between), a beat often tending to a succession of pairs of stresses. As I wrote this, I turned up a leading article in today's *Times* which became moved about British relationships with Eastern Europe, thus:

> The British are fortunate in not having been defeated, occupied, subjugated, or ravaged by extreme ideologies for a very long time, but this lack of experience creates a mental gulf between them and most of the European continent. There are things they know nothing of at first hand which are still living memories for many Europeans. As a result they tend to see Eastern Europe in excessively simple terms – regimes against people, dissidents against police, good against bad.

If this is read aloud, there will be little difference in where different readers will put the main stresses (not none – some but not all will stress 'long' in line 3, and similarly 'still' in line 6), or in the phrases into which the passage will be divided. The stressed syllables will tend to be spoken at intervals of time nearly enough equal to give an impression of some regularity of beat, even though there are very different amounts of unstressed matter between them, but there will be some degree of pause, varying from very slight to clearly marked, between phrases. Here is how I would read it; the stresses are marked by acute accents and the phrases separated by oblique strokes.

> The Brítish are fórtunate / in nót having been deféated, óccupied, súbjugated, / or rávaged by extréme ideólogies / for a véry long tíme, / but this láck of expérience / creates a méntal gúlf / between thém and móst of the Européan cóntinent. / There are thíngs they know nóthing of / at fírst hánd / which are still líving mémories / for mány Européans. / As a resúlt / they ténd to see Éastern Éurope / in excéssively símple térms – / regímes against péople, / díssidents against pólice, / goód against bád.

Of my seventeen phrases, two contain four stresses, three three, eleven two, and one only one. Your reading will differ in detail but will almost certainly support the same conclusion: the only 'regular pattern of sounds' into which English has any natural tendency to fall is that of a series of two-stress phrases, in approximately even timing.

Now take this tendency and make it a rule, and you have enough regularity to supply the requirement of a poetry, the natural poetry of English. It is a poetry which in fact existed, among that group of European peoples that scholars call 'Germanic', some of whom were to invade Britain and bring with them a speech that would thenceforth be describable as, in their form, Englisc.[3] To the rule of the two-stress phrases these early poets added one important structural feature, a type of rhyme. Not, however, a rhyme on

[2] The recordings of Old English and Middle English poetry quoted by Dr. Macrae-Gibson and linked here were graciously provided by Dr. M. Wendy Hennequin.

[3] Members of "Ða Engliscan Gesithas" by policy use the term 'Englisc' to denote the form of English spoken before 1066, rather than 'Old English' or 'Anglo-Saxon'

the endings of words. In a language which tends to be stressed the beginnings of words, and to die away at the ends (and their speech had that characteristic even more than ours does), the natural place to put the rhyme rested on the identity of the consonants that open the stressed syllables (usually the first syllable of the stressed word.[4] Scholars normally call this 'alliteration', though it isn't a very good term because it suggests identify of written *letter*, and this method of composition developed centuries before the language was written down; it's a matter of identity of sound. It was used to link the two-stress phrases together in pairs, and we can then think of such a linked pair as the poetic 'line', built from two 'half-lines' (though again as the poems weren't to begin with written down, and even when much later they were, they weren't written out in those lines, it's not an ideal term). The linking worked like this: the first stress of the second half line always looked back to the first half-line by taking part in the 'alliterative' linking, usually right back to the first stress of the line. The second stress of the line often took part in the linking too. But the last stress of the line (the second of the second half-line) did not look back in that way. Poets presumably felt that that would make the line too self-enclosed a thing; they wanted freedom at the end for the line to move forward to the next line, so the last stress was left free. The oldest surviving poetic 'line' of this kind is in Norse, from the fifth century. It owes its survival to the fact that it *was* written down, in the only way possible before Roman letters came to these peoples, that is, in runes. Runes were not normally used for anything longer than a short inscription, often a magical one incomprehensible to us, but this one records simply, if the runes are replaced by our familiar letters, that 'ek hewgastir holtingar horna tawido'; 'I, Hlewgastir, a man of Holt, prepared this horn'. The linking structure, with linking on the initial *h*-sounds, is clear.

Now such poetry as this could still give a rather loose impression, and by the time we find it established in England, poets had tautened the structure somewhat. The commonest shape of two-stress phrases in the normal language has, naturally, unstressed matter between, and on both sides of, the stresses, as in 'the Brítish are fórtunate' in my *Times* example, though in that particular example the unusual group of three balanced phrases at the end upsets the usual proportions. Just the same applies to Englisc; the commonest rhythm in such sequences as King Alfred's *'hie ne wéndon ðætte æfre / menn sceolden swæ réccelease wéorcan / and sio lár swæ oðféallen'*; ['they did not suppose (ween) that ever men should be so heedless (reckless) become and learning ("lore") so fall away.'] Poets, however, largely avoided this rhythm, and preferred phrases in which the two stressed elements were balance by two unstressed elements, neither more nor less. Since words of more than one syllable were stressed on the first one (unless it were a mere prefix), the commonest rhythm of poetry is then naturally one that appears, for instance, in this short sequence from the most famous of all Englisc poems, *Beowulf*, describing how the evil monster Grendel comes stealthily to the king's hall:

> *Mýnte se mánscaða / mánna cýnnes*
> *sýmne besýran* [Play Audio Recording]

['Intended ("meant") the evil scather some (one) of mankind to entrap'].

Notice the *m*-alliteration uniting the first line, but not engaging the last stress, as the poet carries the sense freely forward into the next line, which alliterates on *s*.

But although this was the commonest rhythm, it was never steadily repeated through a poem as the metre

[4] Macrae-Gibson: One should for this purpose think of *every* word as beginning with a consonant. When the first explicit sound is a vowel, there can nonetheless be a quite sharp release of air from the glottis as the vocal cords open to start the utterance, and it is on this 'consonant' that the 'rhyme' linkage is formed, though no letter represents it in the writing. The effect on the page is that any two words beginning with vowels will "rhyme" together, regardless of whether the vowels are the same.

of later English verse would be; within the unity secured by the approximately equal weight of successive phrases, and the structures produced by the alliterative linking, poets allowed the variety of rhythm of the natural language full play – in the passage above, for instance, the next phrase, completing the line '*sumne besyrwan ..*', is '*in sele þam hean*', 'in the high hall' ('hall the high'), with its unstressed elements before and between the stresses, not between and after, giving a quite different rhythmic impression.

This sort of poetry, built out of the natural rhythm of the language, not constraining them to uniformity, and yet with a regularity of structure that holds the ear, will seem strange if we think of poetry as it has classically been viewed in English. Yet this is the poetry which the nature of the language tends to, and when modern poets reject the classical traditions this sort of poetry can often be heard pressing out through what they write. When R.S. Thomas, giving a disenchanted view of *The Welsh Hill Country*, brings before our eyes 'the fluke and the foot-rot and the fat maggot', and later 'the moss on the mould on the cold chimneys', the first is almost a pure Englisc style, and the second not far off, though it substitutes the internal rhyme 'mould/cold' for alliterative continuation on *m*. It is possibly deliberately to write modern English verse on the principles of Englisc. W.S. Auden in particular has done it; this is from *The Age of Anxiety*:

> *Blind on the bride-bed the bridgegroom snores,*
> *Too aloof to love. Did you lose your nerve*
> *And cloud your conscience because I wasn't*
> *Your dish really? You danced so bravely*
> *Till I wished you were. Will you remain*
> *Such a pleasant prince? Probably not.*

It doesn't come out sounding quite like Englisc verse. Modern stress-patterns no longer produce quite so naturally what in Englisc was the commonest verse rhythm – only the first half-line in my quotation here shows it – and we have many more little unstressed words to clutter up the pattern, which may be why Auden has found himself putting a main stress on the second syllable of 'because', a word that would not naturally be stressed. It gets close enough, though, to suggest that the poetry to which Modern English would give rise, if we could start again with no knowledge of past traditions, might be quite close to the poetry of Englisc. Such possibilities must, however, be for the poets to explore. As a scholar, I go back to the period when the language did give rise to such poetry, and in later articles I shall look at some of the things Englisc poets did with it.

This first part of Duncan Macrae-Gibson's article series was first published in *Wíðowinde* 60, pp. 3-5.

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 frequency, 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 examination 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
wláncе 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.][5] **[play audio recording]**

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

[5] Macrae-Gibson: 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.

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 it's 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.

Wrǽtlic is þes wéalstan wýrde gebrǽcan
búrgstede burston brósnað énta geweorc

[play audio recording]

['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'][6]

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 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.

Wæs se hǽwene lýft héolfre geblámden;
brím bérstende blódegesan hwéop
sǽmanna síð oðþæt sóð Métod
þurh Móyses hánd mód gerýmde
wíde wǽðde, wǽlfænden swéop,
flód fámgode ... [play audio recording]

['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 ...'][7]

It's not that the metre is completely different from the other passages – there are some A-rhythms, for instance; 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 hérelǽfum hléhhan ne þórfton
þæt hio béaduwéorca béteran wúrdon
on cámpstéde, cúmbolgehnástes,
gármíttinge, gúmenagemótes,

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

[7] 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 ...

wǽpengewríxles, þaes hi on wǽlfélda
wiþ Éadwéardes áfaran plégoden [play audio recording]

['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']⁸ [

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 found 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.[9] Beowulf is resolved on a dangerous fight, knows he may die, gives instructions about the disposal of his armour if he does, and ends '*gæó 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 héalðegnas fánd [play audio recording]

['never he in all (his) life-days, before ("ere") or since, with harder fortune found retainers ("thanes") in hall].[10]

There is clearly more of the story to come, of what happened when he found those hall-thanes. Had the passage been a summing-up, after the event, then a different verb might have been appropriate, giving with the A-rhythm of '*héalðegnas 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

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[8] Macrae-Gibson: 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?

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.

[9] Macrae-Gibson: For these suggestions about non-A rhythm in closes, and for the two illustrations 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.

[10] Macrae-Gibson: In original metre:
Never in his life-passage, late or sooner,
harder handling hall-men gave him.
(Read it with voice rising onto 'gave')

the poet tells us that his protagonist may hope in the end for the mercy of God:

Óft him anhága áre bebídeþ,
métodes miltse ... [play audio recording]

['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 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 grammatically 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 ...'][11]

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' versions 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.

[11] Macrae-Gibson: 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 ...

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.

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 different 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, but 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, locked 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 is in doubt if the final syllable should be reckoned as one of the principal stresses, shifting 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 available. 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 important 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 situation 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 conjunction 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 '*hrǽgla sélest*' ('*hrǽgl*' = 'armour'), and later still, a sword is '*bílla sélest*'. This is a special favorite of the *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* [play audio recording]

['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').[12] Once more, a poor poet will pile up phrases; a good poet will pile 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 appealed 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 obviously 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.

This third part of Duncan Macrae-Gibson's article series was first published in *Wíðowinde 63*, pp. 7-11.

4. Putting It All Together

So far we have been looking at the methods used by Englisc poets. It's high time we looked at some of the things they did with those methods, beyond the snippets I've been using as illustrations. But there are some new things that must be said first. We've considered what sort of poetry is natural to English, but not yet considered what sort of things would naturally prompt an English speaker to poetry. Now when a man is moved in spirit, what he says will certainly contain those features of emphasis natural to his language, even if he has no conscious stylistic intention at all: it will already then be partway to our 'natural poetry' as with the extract from the *Times* in my first article. The further step to conscious use of these features, as a controlled and structured use, for the better conveyance of what has moved him, is a short and natural one. With this step to a purposive shaping of his language he becomes what an Englisc would call a '*scop*' (a work closely related to the verb, 'to shape'), and we a poet. So one answer at least to 'what sort of things will naturally prompt a man to poetry' is 'the things that move him in spirit'. [13]

I have argued that in any age of English, if men generated from the language a natural poetry its forms would be basically the ones we have been examining. It does not follow, however, that the *themes* of poetry may change. Not totally. Men remain men: they are born; they love; they die. But there are some modes of thought natural to the Englisc that are not so to us, and it will be easier to respond to

[12] Macrae-Gibson: 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.

[13] Macrae-Gibson: Before I go on, a diversion, but it may become important to my main theme later on. I use the word 'man' as in Englisc, to mean a human being of either sex. It is *grammatically* masculine, and so the pronoun that represents it is 'he', but neither the word nor the pronoun defines *sexual* masculinity. In Englisc there was no need for the awkward 'person', 'his or her', and so on which our restriction of the word 'man' now prompts; I am simply reverting to the older practice.

Englisc poetry if we first accustom ourselves to some of these modes. One is a simple, we would say child-like, pleasure in recognizing how the natural word works. We are used to thinking of man as controlling the natural world. We may be interested in a river because we can dam it, or fish in it, or sail boats in it. Or we see ourselves as taking pleasure in the beauty of the natural world, or satisfaction in its grandeur, or in other ways pressing it into our service. 'Sweet Thames, run softly till I end my song' says a modern poet, making of the river a backdrop to his own performance. The Englisc had much less expectation of control, much less apprehension that nature existed to serve them; but an Englisc poet could make the simple observation that '*ea ofdune sceal*' ['(a) river shall (i.e., "it is the nature of rivers to") (flow)(down)'], with a satisfaction that he had recognized the rightness of things that we might find hard to share. That is a very simple example, and even in this one the poet does not leave it quite there, he adds 'flodgræg feran', 'faring grey-flood', no longer just a statement of what rivers do but evoking an image of dark full waters in almost purposive course. In other cases a poet will offer a more extended view, or series of views, of a natural object, producing a structure with enough organization for us to see it as 'a poem' but still with this simple freshness of approach that would be good for our more jaded age to recover.

The very simplicity, though, makes it difficult to present to a reader who does not understand Englisc. The words fall naturally into place in the sense and structure in a way that can be impossible to reproduce in a modern version. The simple modern equivalent words, even when they exist, don't fall into the proper patterns, and if the sense is compelled into a suitably patterned form the natural ease, which is the main appeal, is lost. So no 'original metre' version of my example; just the original with the stresses marked) and a bald prose rendering – please don't judge the quality of the poem from the latter. Notice the very simple rhythming, type A varied by C.

> *Ðeos lýft býreþ lýtle wíhte* [play audio version]
> *ofer béorg-hléoþa; þa sind bláce swìþe,*
> *swéarte, sálopade. Sángas rópe*
> *héaþum férað, hlúde cìrmað;*
> *tredað béaronæssas, hwilum búrgsálo*
> *nìþþa béarna. Némnað hy sýlfe.*

['the air bears up little beings over hill-slopes; they are very dark, swart, black-coated. Full of song (they) go in flocks, loud (they) cry; settle on tree-lined bluffs, (or) at times dwelling-halls of the sons of men. Name them (your)selves name them (selves).']

This counts as a riddle, but the riddling interest is really only in the last half-line, where I give first the sense that would probably first occur to a reader, and then the one that he would take pleasure in perceiving and concluding that these are birds whose name imitates the quality of their cry. In these terms we cannot solve the riddle. Maybe Englisc had an alternative onomatopoeic name for the swallows which the description suggests; we don't know. But one's main pleasure in the poem is not lost by this; it lies not in the riddling but in the poet's affectionate view of the appearance, sounds, and habits of a familiar creature. Notice that his '*cìrmað*' (pronounce the 'c' as 'ch') is much better than the 'cry' I've had to translate it with: think of it as a mixture of 'chirp' and 'murmur'.

Now, another aspect of this satisfaction is a clear view of the natural world. Again, it comes from a collection of riddles, but there's no riddling in this part; it's a description of waves surging against a cliff in a storm. It's poetically more complex than the lasts and raises different problems in presentation. A reader unfamiliar with the Englisc could hardly respond directly to the original with only a keying of a prose rendering; and an 'original metre' version, not this time impossible because of the simplicity of the original, must certainly be inadequate because of the complexity. Previously, talking about particular poetic devices, I've been able for the most part to carry these into my renderings well enough, but in a

poem which uses many and interlocking devices I cannot possibly carry them all. Further, in the longer passages I shall now be presenting, a triple form – original, literal translation, and 'original metre' version – would be too unwieldy; no reader could be expected to dodge about between three forms to put together a response to the whole. So I shall simply print, following the original, a version keeping as much of the quality as I can, and when I have to refer to features which I have not been able to preserve I shall point this out. Where I have had to choose between losing the meanings of particular words and sacrificing the poetic shape I have usually thought the latter was more important.

Hwìlum ic sceal úfan ýþa wrégan [play audio version]
stréamas stýrgan, ond to stáþe þýwan
flìntgrægnne flód Fámig wínneð
wǽg wiþ wǽlle; wónn arísed
dún ofer dýpe; hyre déorc on lást
éare geblónden óþer féreð
þæt hy gemíttað méarclònde néah,
héa hlíncas. Þær biþ hlúd súdu
brímgìesta bréahtm; bídað stille
stéalc stánhlèoþu stréamgewìnes.

While I am reared up, rollers driving,
surges sweeping, and to shoreward thrusting,
flint-grey the flood. Foaming launches
wave on wall-cliff; one comes rising
high as a hill-slope, and behind the next
spuming in tumult surges darkly
till they encounter, crowded near land,
crags of combers – still there cry timbers,
sea-guests sigh – still, unmoving
steep stone-ramparts stand untroubled ...

The 'I' is the inner power of the storm, here 'reared up' (in my version; in the original more simply just 'acting from above') as a wind to drive the waves. The waves are both mountainous and menacing: notice that though the expressed comparison with flint is of colour, harshness is clearly also implied (I a half-line which draws attention to itself with its heavy rhythm). The sea wars against the cliff. '*Winneð*' is 'fights' and '*streamgewinnes*' is '(sea)-streams' fighting' (which leaves the cliffs however unmoved; they '*bidað stille*', 'abide in stillness', under the assault) – little of this could I achieve in my rendering. Despite this warfare there is no imagery of sound until the '*hlud wudu*', 'loud wood', of line 8, suddenly invoking a ship (note the change of rhythm here, the first type C of the passage) and then those who sail in her, 'guests of the sea' but here troubled and murmuring (my 'sigh' isn't quite right). The danger to ship and men, riding the back of the sea at such a time, will be returned to later; but for the present it is the cliffs, as unconcerned for the peril to the ship as they are at the assault of the sea, with which the passage ends. There is one particular unexpected metrical feature in it I would like to mention before I leave it, the 'light' rhythm in line 7, '*þæt hy gemíttað*', sliding into being like those referred to in my third article, but clearly for a different purpose: the two waves, one flung back from the cliff and the other advancing behind, come without disturbance together until the whole force of the half-line has to be concentrated into 'gemíttað'. The waves *meet*, and we are left to imagine for ourselves that encounter of sea-mountains, crowded near land; the poet turns to the tortured outcry of the ship caught in the encounter.

Before my next example of Englisc poetic craft I must introduce another aspect of Englisc thought as it affected the themes of poetry. Love, as I said, is a universal theme. But we think of love primarily in sexual terms. An intense affection between two of the same sex we tend to see at least latently homosexual, even if it has no explicit sexual content. The Englisc didn't. Whether the general use of the word 'man' without restriction is a basis for their view, or a reflection of it, or unrelated, the fact is that they were far more able than we to consider a 'man' without having in mind which 'sex' he was, and they could and did think of love that something that fundamentally existed between 'men' thus regarded. If I call the the affection 'comradely love' I shall seem to be describing an emotion weaker than passionate, sexual love, but it was not so in Englisc times

(though of course male and female did love each other then as now). It might be good for our age to recover the possibility of this, though we could never recover that particular aspect of it which again and again turns up in Englisc poetry, the love between a retainer and his lord. It is hard for us to think of an almost feudal lord as also the emotional center of one's life, but so it was. The lord owed a duty of generous gifts to his retainers; they owed him loyal service in peace and war; but the ideal was far more than one of mutual support and benefit. The lord's seat was the 'gief-stol', the 'seat of giving', but what was given was not only, not most importantly, physical gifts, but the generous love of which they were tokens; and the retainer gave back love again.

The other great poetic theme of death was also much affected by this ideal. Loyal service in war included, if need be, willing acceptance of death in the lord's defence, or if he were killed, in the attempt to avenge him. Our weapons of multiple and anonymous slaughter have made an outrage of the idea of a battlefield death as a fitting crown for a worthy life, yet for the greater part of recorded history it was so seen. All men must die; to approach death knowing you leave behind you good repute was to the Englisc a full consolation for that. In a stable society, it was not in doubt what sort of life would earn this most desirable repute, and one part of it was such a worthy death. It is good to know men with this view of the value of worthy living, and with a willingness proceeding from it to meet the fact of death with open eyes, even though in our day we cannot take the same view, or any view so clear of what worthy living is. In my second article, I looked at one line of Byrhtwold's speech in 'The Battle of Maldon'; here it is in full, starting with one of the most famous pairs of lines in all Englisc, a splendid statement of the duty of continuing courage even in hopeless defeat.

[play audio recording]

Hige sceal þe héardra, héorte þe cénre,
mód sceal þe máre þe ure mægen lýtlað.
Hér lið ure éaldor éall forhéawen,
gód on gréote; a mæg gnórnían
se ðe nu fram þis wígplégan wéndan þénceð.
Ic eom fród féores frám ic ne wílle
ac ic me be héalfe minum hláfórde,
be swa léofan mén lícgan þénce.

Heart shall be the higher, hardihood the keener,
Spirit shall be stronger as our strength lessens.
Here lies our captain cut to ruin,
brave and broken, then abased ever
be now he who from this war-playing wills to flee him.
I have long lived now; leave here I will not
but I will beside him who I served ever,
y so loved a man lay me downward.

The metrical felicity of the three parallel phrases, in parallel A-rhythms, with which this opens, proclaiming rise in inner strength, and then the contrasted rhythm which sets them as triple compensation for fall in physical strength, is clear. So is the 'light' rhythm which, in a more normal function than that of the previous example, introduces the quiet unemphasis – because so clear a duty needs no emphasis – of the speaker's resolve to stay and die: 'ac ic me be healfe'. But this passage is not as rich as some in such detailed excellences; it was not for that I chose it. We shall find them in plenty in the next passage, one of the finest things in all Englisc poetry.

A retainer, who once led the life of love with his lord we have been speaking of, has lost him by death, and is alone. His memory is so poignant that he cannot speak of it directly; he distances himself by creating a figure like himself of whom he can describe how memories build dreams of such vividness that he wakes trying to retain their images as if real, yet as they superimpose themselves on the waking world it absorbs and dissipates them, renewing even greater sorrow (the repeated 'geniwad', 'renewed', of lines 12 and 17 forced on me an awkward translation in the first case, and would not fit in at all in the second.

[play audio recording]

Ðonne sórg and slæ̀p sómod ætgǽdre,
éarmne ánhagen, ófte gebíndað,
þinceð him on móde þæt he his móndrýhten
clýppe and cýsse, and on cnéo lècge

hónda and héofod, swa he hwílum ǽr
in géardágum gíefstóles bréac,
þonne onwǽcneó éft wíneleas gúma,
gesíhð him bifóran féalwe wegas,
báþian brímfuglas brǽdan féþra,
hréosan hrím and snàw hǽgle geménged,
þonne beoð þy héfigran héortan bénne
sáre æfter swǽsne, sórg biþ geníwad,
þonne mága gemýnd mód geondhwéorfeð,
gréteð glíwstafum, géorne geondscéawað
sécga geséldan swímmað oft on wég
fléotendra férð no þær féla bríngeð
cúðra cwídegiedda; céaro bið geníwad

[When sorrow from sleep sunders never,
weaving webs on him wander-linely,
seems in his dreaming that his dear master
clasps with his kisses, with a clear friendship
lays out his loving, as he long ago
when time blessed him took at his hand,
then up awakes an unfriended man (stress un)
sees in his waking weary breakers,
sea-birds swimming, spreading pinions,
swirling snow and hail, sleet all mingled,
then all the heavier heart, more wounded,
sore after sweetness, sorrow renews he
and memory-men mind revolving
greets in gladness, gazing intently,
those dear from his dwelling drift aye away
floaters in flock bring him few truly
words of welcoming; woe is upon him.]

In this version I have not tried to retain the reference to some ceremony of loving allegiance in which the exile in his dream again 'on knee lays hand and head' (lines 4-5), for it would not now be understood; instead, I've made explicit the notion of the loving friendship which the embracing and kissing ('*clyppe and cysse*', line 4) represent, in a way that would have been a tiresome stressing of the obvious to the original reader. Nor did it seem possible to find an equivalent for the "*giefstol*" of line 6, with its implications of generous love. We would use words like 'high seat' or 'throne', but they would substitute notions of eminence quite foreign to the original, so I simply replaced the reference with a more general statement. I have made efforts to retain at least some approximation to all the other features I want to mention, though the first very imperfectly.

Look at the heavy stress forced by the metre on to 'somod *ætgædre*' in line 1, approximately '*united* together'. The wanderer is bound by a doom in which sleep has sorrow closely united to it, for the glad matter of his dreams, which '*þinceð him on mode*', 'appears to him in his heart' (line 3), existed in truth only '*hwilum ær*', 'whiles ago' (line 5) – another word given metrical stress – and his dreaming is always answered by what he '*gesihþ him biforan*', 'sees before him' (line 8, a parallel structure to that of line 3), as he wakes. He tries to overlay the dull reality with the bright dream, to speak to them as if his former companions were indeed present in them (lines 13-15). But, literally floating on the waves as birds, and poetically 'floating' as dream images trying to locate themselves on the real waking world, they keep drifting away (lines 15-16). He cannot retrieve the dream; its memory only strengthens his waking sorrow. Notice how varied rhythms of the dream passage (lines 3-6) drop into plodding, repetitive A-rhythms in the waking (8-12). The B-rhythm of the actual awakening ('*þonne onwæcneó eft*', 'then awakens again') seemed to promise something else, but alas, it is a 'wineleas *guma*' that awakes, a man with no such loved lord and friend ('*wine*') as he had again in his dreams; the promise is not fulfilled. Notice how the dreamer's unclear mental state in his waking is reflected by undefined grammatical structures in lines 13-16. Is '*mod*' the subject or the object of '*geondhweorfeð*' (in my cruder attempt at the same effect, does the mind revolve its memory-men, or do they revolve it?) Can we say just where '*maga gemynd*', '*secga geseldan*', '*geondscawað*' and '*swimmað*' (my 'memory-men', 'those dear from his dwelling', and 'floaters in flock' are similarly uncertain as regards 'greets' and 'drift', though the 'gazes at' which I'd have needed to complete the equivalences was rhythmically impossible)? We cannot; and this is poetic excellence, not incompetence.

These are only a few of the things that could be said about the passage. I could spend a whole article on it and not have exhausted them. As a superb example of an Englisc poet 'putting it all together' it makes a fitting conclusion to the present article. I won't conclude the whole series there, though. I haven't yet taken up my point at the end of article 3 about sequences of that do not break down into distinct 'poems'; there remain some special varieties of Englisc poetic structure that I want to refer to; and I will hope to round the whole thing off by tracing the development (some would say decay) of the 'natural poetry' on past the Englisc period, and so return to where I started in the first article. A final, fifth article will, I hope, accommodate all this.

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5. Filling in and Rounding Off (i)

In my fourth article I offered a number of examples of Englisc poetic craft in action. Much that I would have liked to give I could not, and cannot fit in. I can't treat the greatest of all Englisc poems, *Beowulf* – of epic compass, it spreads itself at all points too fully to be caught in the length of passage I could include. I can't deal with any of the explicitly Christian poetry which bulks so large among the preserved verse, much of it of second intensity, certainly, but some is fine and I'm sorry to pass it over; the relationship of lord and retainer is peculiarly apt as a type of the personal love between God and man. Before I finish, though, I want to support my earlier assertion (article 3) that the craft of Englisc poetry could lead from one theme to another without it being necessarily possible to break the progression down into separate poems at all. I am determined to print at least one complete poem of high intensity, and then I want to tidy up by mentioning some variants of Englisc poetic practice before I conclude with a quick look at later developments. I had hoped that all this would fit in one final article, but it won't, and you must bear with me through two, reaching 'rounding off' only in the next one.

On the first point, consider what starts, clearly, as another riddle:

[play audio recording]

Ic wæs be sónde, sǽwealle néah …
mec úhtna gehwám ýð sio brúne
lágufæ̀ðme beléolc. Lýt ic wénde
þæt ic ǽr oþþe síð ǽfre scéolde
ofer méodubence múðleas sprécan,
wórdan wríxlan …

['I was by the shore, near the sea's edge; every morning the dark waves took me in watery embrace. I little supposed that ever, sooner or later, across the mead-bench mouthless I should speak, exchange words …']

As with the riddle I quoted at the beginning of article 4, I haven't managed a metrical rendering, but notice in the original the opening 'light line' that slides the speaker unobtrusively into our notice, the E-rhythm that gives to the first, 'sea' section an emphatic close, but one clearly looking forward to something new to come (line 3), and the postponement after '*lyt ic wende*' to whet curiosity before we discover what I 'little weened'. This last is the only one of the effects that my translation could try to catch.

The solution to the riddle so far would seem to be a reed, from which a pen is made – remember that to the English writing was much more clearly seen as recorded speech than to us. But as the poet develops his theme of the strange way in which such a being can 'speak', the presentation changes. Remarkably, he says,]

hu mec séaxes órd and seo swíþre hónd,
éorles íngeþonc and órd sómod
þíngum geþýdan, þæt ic wiþ þé scéolde
for unc ánum twám ǽrendspræce
abéodan béaldlice, swa hit béorna má
uncre wórdcwídas wíddor ne mǽnden.

['how for a knife's point and the right hand, the thoughts of a man and the point with them have conducted their business, so that I should offer boldly a message-speech to you on behalf of just the two of us, so that other men should not report our words more widely'.]

Well, the knife cuts and sharpens the reed, but the emphasis on the point of the knife is unexpected, and it is not the cutting of a pen that creates the message;

moreover, such personal speech to a single hearer ('to thee', not 'to you' if modern English allowed it) is odd in a riddle and hard to reconcile with the apparently open speech earlier 'across the mead-bench'. What has happened is that the theme has mutated into a different sort of 'mouthless speaker', a slip of wood on which a knife's point has carved a message in runes; moreover, a particular rune-stave coming from a particular man, and in the next few lines we find ourselves entering what scholars have regarded as a separate poem, and have titled 'The Husband's Message'. A few lines further, and the speaker appears not to be the rune-stave itself but a human messenger carrying it and adding to its brief cryptic communication an extended account of 'the husband's' situation and plans.

This 'husband' is a very interesting person, apparently both a particular man driven into exile but now with a rebuilt and fortunate life in which he calls his wife to join him, and a type of Christ, ascending into heaven and calling the human soul to him there. The blend bothers critics because though the religious implications are clearly there the poet won't stay consistently with them. But who are we do insist that Englisc poets must be, in our terms, consistent? Was an artist of the time, who drew a naturalistic animal head, but extended the body and legs into an elaborate interlaced pattern, being 'consistent'? Do we blame him because he was not? Rather we enjoy the experience of his special sort of presentation, and so we should with the poetry.

I have digressed from my main point about structure, but into a related point from which return is easy, for critics are also bothered because they expect 'a poem' to 'open' at a definite point, and it's not clear where the preceding riddle ends, and 'The Husband's Message' starts. Of course it's not clear; there is no such point; a type of 'transition passage' which would not trouble a music critic for a moment has simply not been recognized by literary critics for what it is.

Incidentally, 'The Husband's Message' also illustrates that although what I have called 'comradely love' is a characteristic theme of Englisc poetry, love of man and woman is not neglected. So does my next piece, my 'complete poem of high intensity'. Englisc poetry, as I've said, tends rather to richly discursive structures than compressed ones, so a poem short enough for my purpose must be in some degree untypical. In this one the biting but restrained ferocity of theme, and certain features of structure, may seem more in line with Norse than with Englisc practice (there may indeed be a Norse influence), but here it is anyway. It is known simply as 'Wulf and Eadwacer' from the two persons named in it, but the protagonist and speaker is neither of these. A bare prose translation would be an outrage, and I have done my best to keep some at least of its quality in my rendering.

[play audio recording]

Léodum is mínum swylce him mon lác gífe;"
willað hy hine aþécgan gif he on þréat cýmeð –
úngelic is ús!
Wúlf is on íege, ic on óþérrre;
fæst is þæt églond, fènne biwórpen;
sindon wælhréowe wéras þǽr on íge;
willað hy hine aþécgan gif he on þréat cýmeð –
úngelic is ús!
Wúlfes ic mines wídlastum wénum dógode,
þonne hit wæs rénig wéder ond ic réotugu sæt,
þonne mec se béaducafa bógum bilégde;
wæs me wýn to þon – wæs me hwæþre eac láð.
Wúlf, min Wúlf, wéna me þíne
séoce gedýdon, þine séldcýmas,
múrnende mód, nales mètelíste.
Gehýrst þu Éadwacer? Uncerne èarne hwèlp
bireð Wúlf to wúda.
þæt mon èaþe toslíteð þætte næfre gesómnad wǽs
uncer gíedd gèador.

[To people of mine will come as a present give
him they will destroy there if in their doom falling --
unlike for them and me.
Wolf's on an island, I am on another one,
fast is that island, with fens begirded,
and are death-cruel dwellers on that island,
him they will destroy there if in their doom falling –

unlike for them and me.
Wolf, ah mine, in wide-tracking wishes I reached for
when it was wet, the weather and I weeping sat,
then were my own hero's arms about me
and was joy therein, yet for me was also, woe.
Wolf, my Wolf, wishing for you now
sick has made me, and your seldom comings
sorrowing spirit, and no starve of food.
Now hear you, Eadwacer? Our ill-got whelp
(stress on 'Ead')
is with Wulf to the wood!
That is easily broken that was bonded never
our pair-poem.]

The opening is an easy and confident A-rhythm reference to 'my people' (the rhythm, alas, is spoiled by my translation), but the confidence is destroyed at once with a C-rhythm, one with a long first unstressed element, giving a heavy stress on 'lac', 'gift'. A gift to my people, an important one – yet not a gift, only *as if* ('swylce' one should give them a gift, a gift that they will wish to destroy 'if he comes into their company'. The 'he' and 'hine', both masculine pronouns, cannot refer back to '*lac*', which is not a masculine noun, and 'comes into their company' is rather the action of a man than a 'gift', but what man as yet unknown. The original never declares itself as obviously as my 'Wolf' had to. No rules of capitalization in Englisc; the word can simply mean 'a wolf' (or by a well-known extension, 'an outlaw'). He and 'I', the speaker, are separated from each other on 'islands' – the word is in Englisc quite proper for an area of firm land surrounded by marsh. The threat to him is repeated, and the abnormal single 'half-line' with it. 'My' feelings towards Wolf are very different from 'my people's'. They would gladly get their hands on him, to make away with him; I dream of his arms about me – but it happens so rarely, and dangerously, that beside the joy of it (and the line falls away flatly in the second half with neither regular rhythms or nor alliteration as it records the fact) there is also hatefulness. The circumstances are becoming clearer; Wolf is my outlaw-lover. My wide wandering and unsteady hopes of him are expressed in a line of long and irregular metre (formal stresses on '*wulf*' and '*wid*', but the unstressed sequence '*-es ic mines*' can hardly be read without some rise in the middle on '*min-*', quite against the usual Englisc practice). His arms are as strong as a tree's – '*bogum*' is simply our word 'bough' (with a dative ending); my grief is as natural a force as the rain ('*renig*', 'rainy' had to change in my translation because we haven't a word for weeping that would alliterate on *r*). But the poem ends on a wholly personal note, a savage one. Who is Eadwacer? Close to the speaker so she uses the dual form '*uncer*', 'of the two of us' (untranslatable, of course), but what they have together is a 'wretched whelp' (my ill-got' for the alliteration, is too specific), If her lover is seen in animal terms as a wolf, who can this whelp be but the child of 'the two of us', an unloved child of an unloved husband; and the lover takes a terrible revenge, suitable to his character as a wolf, by carrying it off, thus destroying the marriage, '*uncer giedd geador*', 'the song together of the two of us', which is easily destroyed because never really '*gesomnad*', 'put together'. A poem of great force. (I ought to say, by the way, one whose interpretation is at several points disputable. I have given what seems the likeliest sense, but not a guaranteed one, though everyone agrees about the power.

I can use this poem to introduce the variants of practice I spoke of, but this makes the most convenient point to break between articles, so that must be postponed until the final one.

This fifth part of Duncan Macrae-Gibson's article series was first published in *Wiðowinde* 65, pp. 12-15

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 practices. 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 seizes the attention. When a poet deliberately 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 (elsewhere 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 both 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.

[play audio recording]

Me þæt wýrd gewǽf ond gewýrht forgéaf
þæt ic grófe grǽf, ond þæt grimme scrǽf
fléan flǽsce ne mæg þonne flánhrèd dǽg
nýdgràpum nímeþ, þonne seo néaht becýmeð
seo me éðles ofónn ond me her éardes oncón
þonne líchoma lígeð, líma wýrm fríteþ,
ac him wénne gewígeð ond þa wíst geþýgeð,
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 compelling 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 measures 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 '*cymeð*' 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 deceitful 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 laying 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

[play audio recording]

['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 possible):

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 within it, and how readily 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 response 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 temptation 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 composing 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 treacherously 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.

[play audio recording]'

Þa cléopede Héngest, cníhtene swíkelæst
Nímeð eoure séxes, séle mine bérnes,
and óhtliche eou stúrieð and nénne ne spárieð!'
Brúttes þer weoren ríche, ah ne cuðe heo nóht þa spéche,
whæt þa Sáxisce mén séiden heom bitwéoenen;
heo bréoden ut þa sæxes 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 daggers 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 '*-uried*': '*-aried*', 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 final half-line is meant to be; should be see alliteration as throwing stress on the normally unaccented prefix '*bi-*'"?

In this situation, when more careful poets adopted the old practices, they could not simply adhere carefully to the old traditions, since these were no longer alive. New forms developed. Some poets seized on the possibility 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,

[play audio recording]

with lel lettres loken, in lond so has been long

['with faithful ('loyal') letters linked, as has been long (the practice) 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):

[play audio recording]

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 modernization of spellings I could present without 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

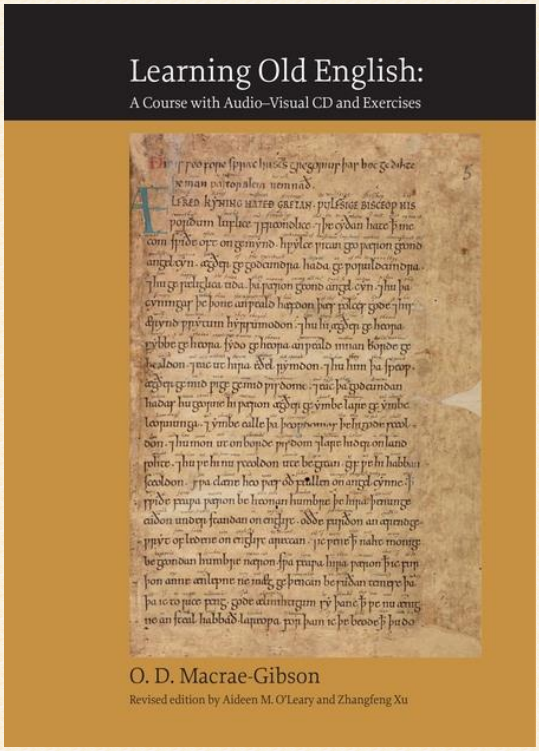
No evil thing approach or enter in.
This day at height of noon came to my sphere
A spirit zealous, as he seemed, to know
More of th'Almighty's work, and chiefly Man.

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.

This sixth part of Duncan Macrae-Gibson's article series was first published in *Wīðowinde 65*, pp. 6-9



Riddles by Bruce Byfield

Riddle 1

Rarer than silver · that rests in a purse,
Worth more than a child · a widow might nurse,
Cannot be bought · if you count the cost,
Defend it too fiercely · and find it lost.

Riddle 2

My life's from the Laugher, the lithe and the sly.
My brother waits · brooding in water,
and sister sets · supper for the uneating.
While teething, I took table-meats
from the Nine-Rune Master, the raider of mead,
and reveled beside · two ravens and wolves.
A hand that is no hand · had me chained;
now nothing clings to me, though I'm closely clasped.
I'll stretch one day, and strip myself of restraints,
I'll be the eater · of the other eye.
I'll find a feast · that will flame within me,
and gnaw it in · the numbness of nightcold.

Riddles by Donald Mace Williams

Low-Born Emperor

Lacking in weight, he wields masses,
their roar and flash, fury and drive,
and seething casters · of cargoes of fire
arcwise across · the emptied land.
Those ragings tethered, he takes the field
in cleats and helm, or counts his triumphs
where charts tally, or chattering drills,
inroads on enemies. But this awesome force
with the toothy, stuttering · stich-halving name
is blind and deaf, bodiless, silent,
abiding in murk, elemental, unseen,
driving half the world · with his heedless stir,
an arch power spawned · in a seedy room.

The Scribes

Lofty and literate · they leave behind
letterless kin · in their kingdom's ranks.
Cursives they write, these clamorous scribes,
pens dipped in blue: · imponderable lines,
ephemeral thoughts, fleeting suggestions,
veiled definitions, victory the point.

Originally published in Form Quarterly

More Riddles by Donald Mace Williams

Continuous Gestation

Originally published in *Measure*, IV, 1, 2009

Winking, wobbling, a womb with eyes,
fertile as catfish, fleet and languid,
her Weltanschauung · voluble, silent,
arachnidlike, her legsprawl flattened,
she waits for her partner: approach, embrace,
a fecund exchange, and she's full again,
always pregnant, her inside bumped
by heads and elbows till the hour arrives,
months in the making, of her motherhood.
Delivery done, no lag granted,
in her round belly · brood stirs anew,
her hands-off doctors heard but not seen,
her days a rush, her regimen endless.

Sweet and Sour

Originally published online by *Better than Starbucks*

One door of five · welcomes this guest.
Though bringing burdens · she bears ours away.
Two staffs support her · when, skipping, hobbling,
in black-dotted dress · she dances by;
warmly invited, once taken in
hard to send home,· she heals with charm
but her darker side · saddens us too.
Let a scene be merry, she makes it so,
yet some in her nearness · never feel joy.
Quarreled over, misunderstood,
she speaks a language · souls only know.

Skyline Herds

Published in Nov. '08 by JASAT;
also Sept. 26, 2014, in San Antonio Express-News

On the high mesa · where mustangs posed,
new presences · playing, feeding:
Lipizzaners, long-backed and elegant,
rearing whitely, radiant hooved,
princely bodies · pawing in unison
as if sky were soil · and snow covered
their airy fodder, Aeolian hay.
Fruitful their scraping · for such herds now
mount the skylines · of many a range,
proliferant, pale, looming and grand,
Wayland's remudas · windily pastured.

Change of Pace

Sluggard and lingerer · he lagged to the rear,
heedless of pleas, · of my hands' exhorting,
my poundwood tantrums, · torpor, anguish
at stone-booted slouchiness, · spite, mockery.
Then how does it happen · with hateful speed
silent footed · he flits ahead
while leadshod I lumber, · logy and tired,
wasted, my calls · to wait, to tarry,
my eyes, astrain, · seeking him out,
distant and dwindling, · when, decades past,
no fury of mine · could move him to hasten?

The Domestication

With huffings and blats · they hied themselves
into our presence, eagerly massed,
warm though weightless, awaiting their call
and the wished-for burdens · that a breath would load
or a sob, a shudder, a seething rage.
In time, conceiving, we took them on,
fumblingly first · then faster, learning,
our skill as packers · improving till
in a single moment · we could send hundreds
abroad, laden · with burdens of ours
though they, unseen, lacked substance and bone.
This, too, we found: these flying things,
energized air, once out, were gone.
No tears of ours could · toll them back.
The wonder is how · once, as they milled,
their strength unguessed, we stood unbroken
by loads that the moaning herds
longed to take from us.

Youth and Age

Playful in childhood, prancingly bright,
heels high-kicking · in heedless joy,
he shuns profundity, freedom his creed,
treble his tunings, untroubled songs.
One day he wakens · to deeper tones
and slow awarenesses, solemn reflections.
darker his way now, winsomeness past,
burdens abounding, by breadth supported
and helpers' backs. Happy no more,
he labors darkly, at last coming
gloomy and old · to the end decreed,
his tongue tasting · tears for his youth.

More Riddles by Donald Mace Williams

Changeable Presence

Originally published in Barrow Street, Winter 2004

Shaper and batterer, soother of victims,
now low, now high · lingering, dashing,
blue-skinned or green, or brown, whitely crowned,
servant and poisoner, poised to arise
in life and beauty · when bonds hold her,
death and suffering · when sundered from those.
Her soft body · is sought by men
both night and day, but death visits,
with writhing and fear, those who find her unsought.
And while one grows weary, wishing her elsewhere,
another's chants · fill chapels with pleas
that her gentle touch, tiresome before,
come, night or noon, and nevermore leave.

Defier of Gravity

Originally published online in *Pulsebeat,* 7, 2024

Up is his down, his easy path,
down his downfall. Death can win him
through his own gorging, this guest's custom
when all unbidden · he breezes in
and loud, arrogant, eats poor wretches
out of house and home. But heaped tables,
meats in abundance, manage no more
to ease his hunger · than empty ones,
and dinner over · he dies on the spot,
or unappeased · prowls to the neighbors',
merry fellow, for more glutting,
Then, dead or alive, leaves his hosts
in the black, bankrupt, brief though his stay was,
a monster, clearly, missed by no one,
his rude arrival rued and lamented.
How different, though, when, duly met,
calm and engaging, he graces a room,
the loved center · of circled talk,
fed, though not petted, a peerless uniter.
At length, when left, he lingers all night,
dying, paling, till people stir
and a breathed greeting · brings back his smile.

Ceaseless Laborer

Soother, subverter, vein opener,
crasher of barricades, comforter of pain,
limitless ranging, lightlike my speed,
my intimates countless, confidants few,
by dark or day · dealing alike
with hermits and hosts, unhurried, sure,
manifold-featured, now masked, now flensed,
or vague, whispering,· I visit all
whether late or soon, longed-for or fled,
with never a pause · in my peregrination
nor weariness, nor wishing myself
applause, welcome, wealth or comfort.
As for security, who claims as much?
I need only · number my deeds
so as not to see, some smoke-red dawn,
I have done so well · no work survives.

Modern Dancers

Originally published in *JASAT*, Nov. 2008

Moved by a power · that prayer can't call
but a fingertip can, two figures spring up
in an instant dance, evenly paired,
he slender, she round. (Strange, when you think
there's no number that tells · the times he's the larger.
And yet he amounts · to just more than she.)
They flit and cross, forward and back,
in a whirl, in rows, in rings and spires,
miming and melting · manifold forms.
It all seems giddy, but even so,
their line moving brinkward · from left to right
makes sense of the dance, gives it depth—or not;
it's for us to judge. What isn't in doubt
as we screen and cull · is the speed of the waltzers,
breakneck, unchallenged, brainless as light.

Another Riddle by Donald Mace Williams

Unmoved

Men without number, merciless, wound me,
my chaste beauty · their challenge and joy.
Their fingers, restless, rove my body.
with their heavy lengths · they lie on me, nights,
or by day, panting, push into me,
hard and unbending, their bared needfulness:
frightful, but some, failing this, die,
grasping, deserving. Greed, for others,
lust's deputy, with lances, roaring,
keen pulse–piercer, punctures my veins,
a sunlit vampire, sucker of blood.
Flayed, too, and slashed, stripped and defiled,
but never bowed, numinous, pale,
I stand as sorceress, summoning weather,
guiding, inspiring · my scornful adorers.

Answers to Riddles

- "Riddle 1", a good reputation
- "Riddle 2", the Fenris wolf
- "Low-Born Emperor," testosterone
- "The Scribes," geese
- "Continuous Gestation," the space station
- "Sweet and Sour," music
- "Skyline Herds," wind farms
- "Change of Pace," time
- 'The Domestication', words
- "Youth and Age," a river.
- "Changeable Presence," water.
- "Defier of Gravity", fire
- "Ceaseless Laborer," death
- "Modern Dancers," the zeros and ones of math and science
- "Unmoved," a mountain

Call for Submissions

The Fall issue of *Forgotten Ground Regained* (https://alliteration.net) is open for submissions. **I am especially interested in poetry that explores themes of love, devotion, and desire** – themes that are, thus far, relatively sparsely represented in modern English alliterative verse. Submissions should be sent to Paul D. Deane at the following email address: pdeane@alliteration.net

Requirements:

1. **Submissions must be in modern English, but authors should feel free to submit poems that take advantage of the diction, rhythms, and syntax of particular language varieties and communities.** I do not discriminate against Scots, Appalachian English, Black English Vernacular, Indian English, or any other language variety, though I do ask that authors be prepared to supply notes to explain any terms or expressions that outsiders to their communities may not readily understand.

2. **Submissions should make skillful, *systematic* use of alliteration** in ways that use alliteration to reinforce the rhythm and connect important ideas. Overall, I prefer poems that have the strongest impact on readers when they are read aloud. I therefore encourage authors to include links to audio or video versions of their poems in their submissions.

3. **I would love to see people experimenting** with modern English versions of Old and Middle English alliterative verse, with Old Norse forms like *ljoòahattr* and *drottkvætt* or modern Icelandic *rimur*, or with new alliterative forms designed to highlight modern English rhythms and speech patterns. While my first preference is what traditional scholarship calls alliterative-accentual verse, I am also open to alliterative free verse or to alliterative versions of traditional forms, such as the ballad, as long as the alliteration is clearly a structural rather than a decorative feature of the form.

4. **I am open to work both by contemporary poets *and to projects that would normally be considered to fall outside the literary mainstream***, such as speculative poetry, SCA Bardic Arts projects, and fan fiction.

5. **There is no hard upper length limit**, though poems more than five to six pages in length are likely to be published separately on the website, with links provided from the Fall issue, rather than being included directly in the pdf magazine. Note that I love both both the lyrical and the narrative turns in poetry, so longer narratives will be given careful consideration.

6. Send submissions in the body of the email. I will not read attachments.

Submissions for the Fall Issue must be received by September 15th, 2024.

PUBLICATIONS NOTED

Jane Beal
- Caedmon Remembers

Pam Clements
- White Owl Irruption

Paul D. Deane
- Like A Tree Standing Tall (After Psalm 1)
- How Many, How Many? (After Psalm 3)
- Where Echoes Call and Crash (After Psalm 4)
- O Lord, I Call (After Psalm 5)
- Silence is Not Safety (After Psalm 7)
- You Have Graced the Heavens (After Psalm 8)

Kathryn Ann Hill
- The Martyrdom of Stephen

Pat Masson
- Dragon-Fighter
- A Riddle
- Mnemonic for the Futharc
- The Yule Tree
- Making Waves: An Experiment in Alliteration

Oz Hardwick
- Journey to the West
- The Exiles' Song
- The Fairford Mermaid
- The Green Man Awakes
- True Thomas

Margaret Stearns
- Fore(dis)closure and Sweet in Sap Semantics

Book Links Added

Amit Majmudar
- *What He Did in Solitary* (contains two poems in half-lines: "Bloodline" and "Solitary")

O.D. Macrae-Gibson
- *Learning Old English*

James Merrill
- *A Scattering of Salts* (contains the alliterative poem "Rescue")

Mary Thaler
- *Ulfhildr*

Links Added to Other Works

Malcolm Cowen
- A Riddle

Annie Finch
- Translation of the Seafarer

A.Z. Foreman
- The Song of Heshbon

Geoffrey B. Elliott
- In Response to Schaubert
- How's This for Ad Copy?
- No Scholar

Joe Hoffman
- *Old English, New World*

Nancy Gaffield
- *Wealden [half-lines without structural alliteration]*

Amit Majmudar
- Bloodline *from What He Did in Solitary*
- Chillicothe *from What He Did in Solitary*

Frank Mundo
- "Leo Kapatinsky's First Tale" in The Brubury Tales

Aaron Poochigian
- Talking Trey Down

Carter Revard
- The Poet's Cottage in *Florilegium*
- Pilotless Angel in *How the Songs Come Down*.

Patrick Rothfuss
- The Lay of the Eastern King in *Clash of the Geeks*

Joseph S. Salemi
- Gawain's Prayer in the Wilderness

Eli Thorpe
- Six alliterative poems in *Making Waves*

Edward Turbeville
- *Aeneid*, Book III

James Matthew Wilson
- Silenus and His Gang