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The Natural Poetry of English

5. Filling in and Rounding Off (i)

In my fourth article I offered a number of examples of English 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 English 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 English 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 English 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:

Ic wæs be sōnde, sæwealle néah ...
mec úhtna gehwám yð sio brúne
lágufæðme beléolc. Lýt ic wēnde
þæt ic ær oþþe sīð æfre scéolde
ofer méodubence mūdleas sprécan,
wórdan wríxlan ...

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[‘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 hōnd,
éorles ingeþonc and órd sómod
þingum gebýdan, þæt ic wiþ þe scéolde
for unc ánum twám ærendspræce
abéodan béaldlice, swa hit béorna má
uncre wórdcwidas widdor ne mænden.

[‘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.

Léodum is mínum swylce him mon lác giffe;"
willað hy hine aþécgan gif he on þréat cýmeð –
úngelic is ús!

[[play audio recording](#)]

Wúlf is on iege, ic on óþérrre;
fæst is þæt églond, fenne biwórpén;
sindon wáelhréowe wéras þáér 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 þine
séoce gedýdon, þine séldcýmas,
múrnende mód, nales mèteliste.
Gehýrst þu Éadwacer? Ucerne earne hwèlp
bireð Wúlf to wúda.
þæt mon eaþe toslited þætte næfre gesómnad wæs
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 English; 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.

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