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The Natural Poetry of English

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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 díme, / 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.[1] 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 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.[2] 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 ǽfre / 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:

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[1] 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'

[2] 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 chords 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.

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

['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 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 bridgeroom 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.

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