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The Natural Poetry of English

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'.¹

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 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 world 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

¹ 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.

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.

*Deos lýft býreþ lýtle wíhte
ofer béorg-hléoþa; þa sind bláce swiþe,
swéarte, sálopade. Sángas rópe
héaþum férað, hlúde cirmað;
tredað béaronæssas, hwilum búrgsálo
niþþa béarna. Némnað hy sýlfe.*

[\[play audio version\]](#)

[‘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 ‘cirmað’ (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.

*Hwilum ic sceal úfan ýþa wrégan
stréamas stýrgan, ond to stáþe þýwan
flintgrægne flód Fámig winned
wæg wið wælle; wónn arised
dún ofer dýpe; hyre déorc on lást
éare geblónden óþer féred
þæt hy gemittað méarclónde néah,
héa hlincas. Ðær bið hlúd wúdu*

[\[play audio version\]](#)

*brímgíesta bréahm; bidað stille
stéalc stánhlèoðu stréamgewines.*

Whiles 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,
crag of combers – still there cry timbers,
sea-guests sigh – still, unmoving
steep stone-ramparts stand untroubled ...

The 'T' 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 English poetic craft I must introduce another aspect of English 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 English 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 English 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 English 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.

*Híge 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 wíglégan wéndan þénced.
Ic eom fród féores fram ic ne wille
ac ic me be héalfe minum hláfórde,
be swa léofan mén lícgan þénce.*

[[play audio recording](#)]

*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.

Donne sórg and slæp sómod ætgædre,
éarmne ánhagen, óft gebíndað,
þinceð him on móde þæt he his mónðryhten
clyppe and cýsse, and on cnéo læcge
hónða and héofod, swa he hwílum ær
in géardágum gíefstóles bréac,
þonne onwæcneó eft wíneleas gúma,
gesíhð him bifóran féalwe wegas,
báþian brímfuglas bræðan féþra,
hréosan hrím and snaw hægle geménged,
þonne beoð þy héfigran héortan bénne
sáre æfter swæsnæ, sórg biþ geníwad,
þonne mága gemýnd mód geondhwéorfed,
gréteð glíwstafum, géorne geondscéawað
sécgas geséldan swímmað oft on wég
fléotendra férd no þær féla brínged
cúðra cwídegiedda; céaro bið geníwad

[play audio recording]

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
greet 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 *ætgeádre*' 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 'greet' 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.

This fourth part of Duncan Macrae-Gibson's article series was first published in *Widowinde* 64, pp. 3-8.