

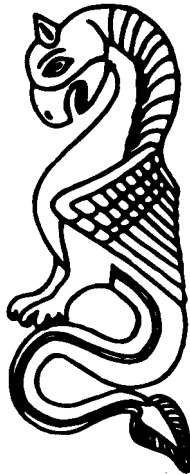
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Notes on Old English Poetry

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I Openings

It seems that light verses open many poems; for example, *Cædmon's Hymn*:

x x x ˘ x
Nu scylun hergan hefaenricaes uard
metudæs maecti end his modgidanc,
uerc uuldurfadur.¹

Now the creation of the glorious Father must praise the
Guardian of the kingdom of heaven, the might of the Lord and
the thought of his mind.

For *nu* followed by the verb, with the subject delayed to the end of the clause,
compare *Christ II*, lines 561–63:

Nu sind forcumene ond in cwicsusle
gehynde ond gehæfte, in helle grund
dugupum bidæled, deofla cempa.

Now the devils' warriors are vanquished and humbled and
confined in living torments, in the pit of hell, deprived of glory.

It will be noted that the early Northumbrian version of *Cædmon's Hymn*
quoted, that of the Moore manuscript of the eighth century, has no subject
expressed in the first half-line; the same is true of the other excellent early
Northumbrian version, that in a manuscript now at Leningrad and, significantly in
the history of the transmission of the text, also in a relatively early West Saxon

version.² There is sound reason, therefore, for believing that we should not supply *we*, but should take *uerc*, 'work' or 'works', of the third line to be the subject, as in my translation,³ though Bede telling the story of Cædmon in *The Ecclesiastical History of The English People* did interpret the poem in Latin as opening with the verb in the first person plural:

Nunc laudare debemus auctorem regni caelestis, potentiam
Creatoris et consilium illius, facta Patris gloriae.

Now we must praise the Maker of the heavenly kingdom, the
power of the Creator, the deeds of the Father of glory.⁴

That the work shall praise its maker is an idea found also much later, used attractively by Schiller in his 'Das Lied von der Glocke', in which the work, the bell, by the excellence of its sound, praises its master, the bellfounder who made it thus well — the bellfounder and his assistants must toil in the sweat of their brows:

Von der Stirne heiss
Rinnen muss der Schweiss,
Soll das Werk den Meister loben,
Doch der Segen kommt von oben. (ll. 5–8)⁵

Sweat must run hot from the forehead if the work is to praise the
master; but the blessing comes from on high.

It is thought that Schiller's use may owe a debt to Ecclesiasticus 9. 24, Authorized Version 9. 17: 'For the hand of the artificers a work shall be commended.'⁶ If so, Schiller improved on Sirach's wording.

When dealing with a poetic neat-herd the modern exegete is soon in danger of overegging the pudding. Or rather, aided by excellent indexes, the product of Benedictine learning at St Maur, the modern exegete easily finds patristic aspects in the authentic nine lines we have by this poet. In Swiftian terms, 'As learned Commentators view | In *Cædmon* more than *Cædmon* knew.' Now *Cædmon* was inspired; and what could be better for inspiration to sing in praise of God the Creator than the psalms seen through St Augustine? St Augustine's *Enarratio in psalmum cxliv*, Section 13 (on Verse 10) is directly relevant:

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Confessio enim non peccatorum tantum dicitur, sed & laudis
. . . Proinde quid accipiendum, *Confiteantur tibi Domine,*
omnia opera tua? Laudent te omnia opera tua.⁷

For 'confession' is said not only of sin, but of praise too . . .
Accordingly, how shall we take, 'Let all thy works confess to
thee, O Lord?' Let all thy works praise thee.

A very striking use of this idea comes in *Enarratio in psalmum cxxviii*, Section 5:

Quia bona sunt omnia, quia bonus Deus qui fecit omnia: &
laudent illum opera sua, considerata quia bona sunt, ab eo qui
habet spiritum considerandi, spiritum pietatis & sapientiae.
Undique laudatur Deus ab operibus suis.⁸

All things are good, because the good God made them all: and
his works praise him, for they are considered good by him who
has the spirit of considering them, the spirit of piety and
wisdom. From all sides God is praised by his works.

The light opening half-line of *Cædmon's Hymn*, its sense completed only in the third line of the poem, seems to me characteristic of good Old English openings. The poets get into their poem with a metrical swing by that means. I do not believe that the non-alliterating opening word, *nu*, should be stressed; first, because I do not believe that there ever are stresses in a half-line before the alliterative stress; and secondly, because it would diminish the elegance of the complex opening system.

Let us turn to the opening of *Beowulf*. The opening interjection, *hwæt*, since it has no alliteration, does not, I believe, bear metrical stress; it is like *Cædmon's nu*. Though the distance between subject *we* and its verb *gefrunon* in line 2b is not quite as great as that between the verb *scylun* and its subject *uerc* in line 3a of *Cædmon's Hymn*, the words *we . . . gefrunon* are unusually far apart: both poems open in the grand manner. Klaeber's note on *we . . . gefrunon* refers us to the openings of two Middle High German poems as well as the openings of three Old English poems, *Exodus*, *Juliana*, and *Andreas*.⁹

The two Middle High German poems referred to by Klaeber are *Nibelungenlied* and *Annolied*, neither of which is close to *Beowulf* in wording. The former opens with this stanza:

Uns ist in alten mæren wunders vil geseit
von helden lobebæren, von grozer arebeit,
von fröuden, hochgeziten, von weinen und von klagen,
von küener recken striten muget ir nu wunder hoeren sagen.¹⁰

To us is told in ancient stories many a marvel of heroes
deserving praise, of great distress, of joys, of feasting, of
weeping and lamentation, of bold heroes' battles you can hear
now the marvel.

This is, for English readers, reminiscent of (the somewhat later) *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: the first two stanzas of which tell us in similar manner of changing fortunes in heroic times preserved by ancient tradition — 'listen, and you shall hear'.

Klaeber, no doubt, finds the 'we are told' formula, *Uns ist . . . geseit*, not dissimilar from the opening of *Beowulf*. But the word-order is not unusual for Middle High German; that of *we . . . gefrunon* with the verb long delayed is unusual for Old English. Interesting in the Middle High German poem are the two pairs of internal rhymes, usually regarded by Middle High German scholars as a sign that the stanza belongs to a later stratum than the early *epos* which scholars of the poem identify in what they think best. But a reader coming to it from Old English poetry may not be convinced: metrical complexity at the beginning of the poem is in Germanic verse the grand manner, and as early as *Beowulf*. Klaeber did not tell us that.

The *Annolied* (of c. 1100) celebrates Anno II, Archbishop of Cologne and Vice-Regent of the Empire (1056–75). The poem opens:

VVir horten ie dikke singen
Von alten dingen,
Wi snelle helide vuhten,
Wi si veste burge brechen,
Wi sich liebin vuiniscefte schieden,
Wi riche Künige al zegiengen.
Nu ist ciht daz wir dencken
Wi wir selve sülin enden.

We heard sing ever and again of events long ago, how bold
heroes fought, how they reduced castles, how dear friendships
separated, how mighty kings dwindled to nothing: now the time
has come that we consider how we ourselves must end.

This too begins with ancient traditions transmitted in song, and this is what Klaeber has in mind. The first editor of the poem, Martin Opitz (on whose print we are dependent for the text, the manuscript of which does not seem to have survived, even to be used by Junius in Bodleian MS Junius 16), refers, in his footnotes,¹¹ to the opening stanza of eighteen lines as 'exordium'. Interesting for readers of Old English verse is that the 'we heard sing' formula is followed by a series of 'how' clauses, like the *hu* clause at line 3 of *Beowulf*, and similarly the *Fates of the Apostles*. But at the centre of the exordium of the *Annolied* is the contrast between what we have heard in song of ancient strife, and what we must do now, namely, consider our end, and, as the exordium continues, Bishop St Anno is significant in that consideration.

In *Andreas*, subject and verb come together in a simple opening:

Hwæt! We gefrunan on fyrndagum

Lo, we learnt . . . in distant days.

There is considerable complexity in the opening of *Exodus*.¹² The invitation of line 7b, *gehyre se ðe wille*, 'let him listen who wishes' (or better, I think, 'let him learn by listening who will!'), is related to the opening line of the poem completed by an elaborate accusative plus infinitive (which is completed only at line 7a). Unlike that of *Cædmon's Hymn*, the opening half-line of *Exodus* is, however, not metrically light; and since the poet is unlikely to have tolerated three stressed syllables (*feor*, *neah*, and also *hwæt*) in the half-line, there is no real possibility of transverse alliteration (on *hwæt* and *hab[b]að*) in this line. That line is complex to the more limited extent that an adverbial phrase of two stresses joined by 'and' comes between the subject and its verb. On the other hand, as in the longer intrusion between the subject and its verb in the opening of *Beowulf*, the *Exodus* intrusion *feor ond neah* does not qualify the verb *gefrigen habbað* but, in fact, the *secgan* of line 7b — 'we have heard tell to men far and near':

Hwæt, we, feor ond neah, gefrigen habbað
ofer middangeard Moyses domas,
wræclico wordriht weras cneorissum,
in uprodor eadigra gehwam
æfter bealusiðe bote lifes,
lifigendra gehwam langsumne ræd,
hæleðum secgan: gehyre se ðe wille!

Lo, we have heard tell to men far and near the promulgations of
Moses throughout the world, wondrous, formulated laws for
generations of men, enduring counsel to everyone living, reward
of life after toilsome journeying into heaven for everyone of the
blessed: let him learn by listening who will!

It should be noted that, unlike the opening of *Beowulf*, there is in the opening of *Exodus* no complex alliteration, no use of cross- or transverse alliteration. This opening achieves its stylized complexity by means of the poet's masterly use of syntax within variation.

Exodus does not use the Cædmonian device of having a light first verse. Cædmon did so by using a non-alliterating verb in the first half-line of his poem. So does the poet of Daniel:

Gefrægn ic Hebreos eadge lifgean

I heard tell the happy Hebrews to live,

literally; that is, 'I heard tell how the Hebrews lived in happiness'; but the opening half-line scans, in Sievers's system as type C:

x x x ∠ | ∠ x
Gefrægn ic Hebreos,

which is perhaps better scanned as a light verse:

x x x ∠ ∽ x
Gefrægn ic Hebreos.

The poet of *Christ and Satan* opens with an auxiliary:

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Þæt wearð underne eorðbuendum

That was revealed to those who dwell on earth;

and, with an even weaker auxiliary, *Elene* opens:

Þa wæs agangen geara hwyrftum

Then was passed in course of years;

and *wæs* comes also in the opening half-lines of *Riddles 56*: *Ic wæs þær inne*, 'I was within', and *60*: *Ic wæs be sonde*, 'I was by the shore'. *The Seafarer* opens with another auxiliary:

Mæg ic be me sylfum soðgied wrecan

I can utter about myself a true tale;

and with the same verb, *The Metres of Boethius*, 5 and 26; and a different auxiliary, with pronoun, opens *The Metres of Boethius*, 13. A full, non-auxiliary use of *habban* opens *The Metres of Boethius*, 24:

Ic hæbbe fiðru fugle swiftran

I possess plumage swifter than a bird's.¹³

A non-auxiliary verb opens *Riddles 42*:

Ic seah wyhte wrætlice twa

I saw two splendid creatures;

and the same verb in *Riddles 51, 52, 53, 55, 59, and 64*; and with 'to be', *66* (*eom*). Another verb opens *Riddles 48*:

Ic gefrægn fer hælepum hring endean

I heard tell how a ring began [? to speak] in the presence of men.

The quasi-auxiliary *onginnan* opens *The Descent into Hell*:

Ongunnan him on uhtan æþelcunde mægð

Wellborn ladies did at daybreak [prepare] themselves;

and with the same verb also *The Metres of Boethius*, 7. Very strikingly, *Pharaoh* opens with an imperative:

Saga me hwæt þær weorudes wære ealles

Tell me what there of all of the host might be.

An imperative is used similarly to open a metre, *The Metres of Boethius*, 25:

Geher nu an spell be ðæm ofermodum

Observe now a singular tale concerning the proud;

and the jussive of an auxiliary opens *The Metres of Boethius*, 23:

Sie ðæt, la, on eorðan ælces ðinges

Lo, be that on earth [a happy man] in every thing.

Verbs, preceded by their subject pronouns or not, and even imperatives, open poems without bearing alliteration, and they are, I believe, unstressed in that position. They are inceptive in narrative, including the brief narrative induction, 'I saw' of several riddles, as also in poems of wisdom or prayer.

I do not presume that Cædmon was the first ever to use a verb so, though, of the verse now extant it is likely enough that the use in his opening may well be the earliest. Bede's wording states that the nine lines we call *Cædmon's Hymn* are the opening, given to him in his dream, of a longer poem of praise which he completed on waking:

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Exsurgens autem a somno, cuncta quae dormiens cantauerat
memoriter retenuit, et eis mos plura in eundem modum uerba
Deo digni carminis adiunxit.

When he awoke, he remembered all that he had sung while
asleep and soon added more verses in the same manner, praising
God in fitting style.¹⁴

***II A threefold, highly dramatic device? (Beowulf, lines 702, 710,
and 720)***

The inceptive use of the non-alliterating initial position is widespread. It comes within longer poems at the opening of manuscript sections, whether numbered or not. For example, in *Judith*, Section 11 (l. 122), the auxiliary *habban* is used in that way:

Hæfde ða gefohten foremærne blæd

Then she had won in the struggle pre-eminent glory.

Unnumbered sections in the Exeter Book include that at *Christ*, line 779, the section which contains Cynewulf's runic 'signature':

Ne þearf him ondrædan deofla strælas

N[one] need fear the devils' arrows;

and similarly for the 'signed' section in *Juliana*, line 707:

Ða wearð þære halgan hyht geniwad

Then hope was felt anew by that saint.

In *Beowulf*, critics have sometimes selected three non-alliterative uses of the verb *cuman* as significant reiterations begetting terror.¹⁵ It may be so for some timorous modern readers, but should not they be told, reassuringly, that none of the

three uses is stressed? First, at line 702b, where the quasi-auxiliary *com* (governing the infinitive of a verb of motion *scriðan* 'to stride', line 703) is metrically suppressed before the initial stress of the second half-line:

Soð is gecyþed
þæt mihtig God manna cynnes
weold wideferhð. Com on wanre niht
scriðan sceadugenga. (ll. 700–03)

That truth is well known that mighty God has ruled mankind for
ever. In the dark night strode forth the walker in the shadows.

The second use at line 710a and the third at line 720 are syntactically very similar to the use at line 702, also with a dependent infinitive of a verb of motion, *gongan* 'to go' (l. 711) and *siðian* 'to journey' (l. 720), but the uses differ in the employment of *þa* 'then', which is not used at the first occurrence of *com*, but precedes *com* at the second, and immediately follows *com* at the third use. The second use is at lines 710–11:

.XI.

Ða com of more under misthleopum
Grendel gongan, Godes yre bær.

Then under the mist-slopes (?cover of darkness) Grendel came
advancing; he bore God's anger.

The third use is at lines 720–21a:

Com þa to recede rinc siðian
dreamum bedæled.

The man [Grendel] deprived of joys strode forth then to the hall.

In the second and third uses the sentence starts at the beginning of the line; in the first it starts at the second half-line. In metrical terms that difference is striking, though we lack the feel for their verse to be sure what it betokens other than that *Haken-* or *Bogenstil* makes for great density of texture.

Even more noticeable, visually so, is the fit number *XI*. in the middle of the manuscript line, followed by a large initial capital barred *Ð*. We cannot be sure if the division into fits of the longer Old English poems goes back to the poets themselves; perhaps it does in some cases, yet one would not wish to assert it for *Beowulf*. Even so — and without wishing to suggest that the scribe who wrote the poem down up to the middle of line 1939 was a genius rather than occasionally a bit of a bungler (though probably he was a professional scribe at a not very distinguished centre) — if there were in the poem this marvellous crescendo as, with ever-increasing minaciousness, in comes Grendel, I cannot believe that he would have cut the continuity of the narrative, with one lection ending and another beginning. The poet himself, who seems not to have aimed at suspense (or, if he aimed at it, did not succeed in it) is not likely to have used the disruption as the script-writer of a cliff-hanger serial would; and the scribe is even less likely to have tried to force his copy into the mould of a cliff-hanger. But, in any case, and this is my main point, *com* is used here three times as a function word, a metrically unstressed pseudo-auxiliary.

III The irony of the situation expressed by the exceptional metrical stress of Beowulf, line 563b

The Anglo-Saxons had the means for achieving exceptional emphasis in verse, but, as far as our very limited knowledge allows us to say, the most significant exceptional emphases were laid down by the poet and not left to the interpretation of the reciter or reader, though we must assume that different reciters or readers were able to bring out nuances by the degree of emphasis they attached to the metrically stressed syllables of the verse lines.

Alliteration guides the reader to give exceptional stress to the grammar words in preference to the nouns in the following examples in *Beowulf*:

on **þ**æm dæge **þ**ysses lifes

on *that* day of *this* life

(l. 197; and similarly, ll. 790 and 806);

that is, presumably, 'on that particular day of this life here'. Likewise:

þegnes þearfe swylce þy dogore

a retainer's need, such as at *that* time (l. 1797);

that is, probably, 'at that distant time long ago', or perhaps, 'on that particular day'.

A subtle departure from the normal hierarchy of stress occurs in the second of the following lines, where 'm' alliterates:

Næs hie ðære fylle gefean hæfdon,
manfordædlan, þæt hie *me* þegon,
symbol ymbsæton sægrunde neah. (ll. 562–64)

They did not have joy of that feast, the evil-doers, that they partook of *me*, that they sat round the banquet near the bottom of the sea.

This is Beowulf's speech describing his juvenile contest with Breca. 'They', 'the evil-doers', are the fierce ravagers of the sea which attacked Beowulf in his contest with Breca. Beowulf is the *me*, and that word is stressed and alliterates exceptionally. As has often been observed, the poem is at times grimly humorous. In Beowulf's imagined account of what the monsters did not achieve, there is cruel irony, as he describes the feast they hoped for, a feast where they sit at banquet near the bottom of the sea and Beowulf himself is food for them. The grim jesting is accentuated by the strange inversion of the objects of *þegon* and *ymbsæton*. We might have expected *symbol* to be the object of *þegon*, as in *he on lust gepeah | symbol ond seful*, 'joyfully he partook of the banquet and the hall-cup' (ll. 618b–19a). We might have expected *me* to be the object of *ymbsæton*, when we remember the social circumstance that the Anglo-Saxons would be sitting, not round the genial table, but round the slaughtered and dismembered beast: and the slaughtered beast, says Beowulf, should have been *me*.

IV A long unit of Old English verse and modern editorial punctuation: Beowulf, lines 864–917a

It is in the nature of Old English verse that its longer structures are additive and annexive. I have written elsewhere about *Beowulf* in these terms, especially in

its use of correlatives to build up long paragraphs, grammatically a continuum yet beyond the scope of structures to which we give the term 'sentence'.¹⁶ In that study, long ago, I discussed *Beowulf*, lines 864–917a, and I still regard that as a particularly good example.

I now print this passage with punctuation designed to bring out its continuity rather than to conform to modern custom, and the translation attempts to reproduce that continuity, uncomfortably, I fear, in Modern English. To do so I resort to punctuation less than full stops, and I introduce 'and' where the original has none, as well as present-participle constructions, all of which may be regarded as too easy a course, or too disingenuous for true translation:

- Hwilum** heaporofe hleapan leton,
865 on geflit faran fealwe mearas
ðær him foldwegas fægere þuhton,
cystum cuðe; **hwilum** cyninges þegn,
guma gilphlæden, gidda gemyndig,
se ðe ealfela ealdgesegena
870 worn gemunde, word oþer fand
soðe gebunden, secg eft ongan
sið Beowulfes snyttrum styrian
ond on sped wrecan spel gerade,
wordum wrixlan, welhwylc gecwæð
875 þæt he fram Sigemunde secgan hyrde,
ellendædum, uncupes fela,
Wælsinges gewin, wide siðas,
þara þe gumena bearn gearwe ne wiston,
fæhðe ond fyrena, buton Fitela mid hine
880 þonne he swulces hwæt secgan wolde,
eam his nefan, swa hie a wæron
æt niða gehwam nydgesteallan,
hæfdon ealfela eotena cynnes
sweordum gesæged — Sigemunde gesprong
885 æfter deaðdæge dom unlytel
syþðan wiges heard wyrn acwealde,
hordes hyrde: he under harne stan,
æpelinges bearn ana geneðde
frecne dæde (ne wæs him Fitela mid),

- 890 hwæpre him gesælde ðæt þæt swurd þurhwod
wætlicne wýrm þæt hit on wealle ætstod,
dryhtlic iren, draca morðre swealt,
hæfde aglæca elne gegongen
þæt he beahhordes brucan moste
895 selfes dome, sæbat gehleod,
þær on bearm scipes beorhte frætwa,
Wælses eafera (wýrm hat gemealt)
se wæs wreccena wide mærost
ofer werpeode, wigendra hleo,
900 ellendædum (he þæs ær onðah),
siððan Heremodes hild sweðrode,
eafodð ond ellen: he mid Eotenum wearð
on feonde geweald forð forlacen,
snude forsended, hine sorhwylmas
905 lemede to lange, he his leodum wearð,
eallum æpellingum to aldorceare,
swylce oft bemearn ærran mælum
swiðferhþes sið snotor ceorl monig
se þe him bealwa to bote gelyfde,
910 þæt þæt ðeodnes bearn geþeon scolde,
fæderæpelum onfon, folc gehealdan,
hord ond hleoburh, hælepa rice,
eþel Scyldinga, — he þær eallum wearð,
mæg Higelaces manna cynne,
915 freondum gefægra, hine fyren onwod:
hwilum flitende fealwe stræte
mearum mæton.

At times men famed in war let their brown horses gallop, (l. 865) let them compete where the paths over the ground seemed good, known for excellence; at times a royal retainer, a man rich in rhetoric and the memory of songs, one who recalled an ample multitude of ancient traditions, (l. 870) devised other words bound in truth, that man in turn did set forth skilfully Beowulf's exploit, and did happily recite apt story, did adorn it with varied words, saying everything (l. 875) that he had heard

tell of Sigemund,¹⁷ of deeds of valour, much that was little known, the strife of the son of Wæls, distant journeys of which the children of men would not have known readily, the feuding and the crimes, had not Fitela been with him (l. 880) whenever he, the uncle, wished to say something of such matters to his nephew, as they always were in all hostilities comrades in peril, a great multitude of the race of giants they had humbled with their swords — to Sigemund arose (l. 885) no little glory after the day of his death from the time that that hardy warrior slew the dragon, guardian of a hoard of treasure: he, a prince's son, alone ventured on that perilous deed under the grey rock (Fitela was not with him), (l. 890) however, it was granted to him that his sword penetrated the wondrous serpent so that it was fixed in the wall of rock, the glorious steel weapon, the dragon perishing by this murderous blow, the fierce warrior having achieved by his valour that he, Wæls's son, might enjoy at his own choice the treasure-hoard, (l. 895) loading his ocean-vessel, carrying into the ship's hold bright trappings (the serpent melted hot), he who was of warriors the most widely famed among nations, shield of men at war, (l. 900) through deeds of daring (he had prospered by that), the most since Heremod's martial glory dwindled, the might and the prowess: Heremod had been sent forth, shrewdly dispatched into the power of enemies, among the Jutish giants, for too long the surges of sorrow (l. 905) tormented him, he becoming to his people, to all of noble stock, a mortal care, likewise at earlier times many a wise man had often lamented the ways of the strongminded one, many who looked to him for a remedy from cares, (l. 910) that that son of a prince was destined to prosper, inherit his father's noble rank, to govern a nation, its treasure and the citadel, a realm of heroes, the homeland of the Scyldings — he, the kinsman of Hygelac, came to be to all mankind, (l. 915) his friends, ever more gracious, crime entered that other one; (and still) **at times** they traversed in competition the earth-coloured road on their horses.

As I have said, I am aware of how artificial such a sentence-monster is, and how against Modern English stylistic practice.¹⁸ Yet I do not know how else to present an Old English verse paragraph-sentence or sentence-paragraph. We are not dealing with an ordinary, long complex sentence which, when clumsily handled, bears in German the term of abuse *Schachtelsatz*, 'package-sentence', a term which emphasizes the embedding common in long sentences in Modern German.

Long sentences with embedding are not uncommon in Old English. But the structure of *Beowulf*, lines 864–917a, is no mere *Schachtelsatz*: it is a Russian-doll sentence, with independent sentence-unit within independent sentence-unit. Lines 884b to 913a form an independent unit within the larger structure; and, between lines 884b and 913a, lines 889b, 897b and 900b are independent little sentence-units.

Lines 864 to 917a form a single unit, because the poet emphasizes that the warriors let their horses leap and compete, from lines 864 to 865; and he reiterates, from lines 916 to 917a, that that is what they are doing. In between, we get the celebration of Beowulf, by comparison with Sigemund, the violent dragon-slayer, and by contrast with Heremod, the hope of the nation who turned tyrant and had to be removed. A literal reader may ask: 'did the singer's voice really make itself heard with tales of Sigemund and Fitela and of Heremod above the clatter of horses' hoofs?' The answer is, 'yes'. The same questioner will ask if on that pilgrimage to Canterbury a long drawn-out group of men and women on horseback, not a few of them drunk rather than sober, could really have communicated and listened to stories told for a prize, better told than any other in Middle English. Again, the answer is 'yes'; a poet has created it so above the laws of acoustics.

V *Turning prose into verse: Alfred and Goethe*

Alfred first translated Boethius's *De Consolatione Philosophiae* into Old English prose, and then *geworhte hi eft to leoðe*, 'worked it [the book(s), or rather those parts that were metrical in Latin] up into song [or poetry]', as he tells us in his proem. Neither the prose translation nor the poetic rendering is literal; there are many additions and omissions; and Alfred's translations of Boethius show much independence of thought and expression. The following is a short extract from his translation into prose of *De Consolatione*, Book III, Met. 9, but it owes very little to the source:

Old English Poetry

Ðu gestaðoladest eorðan swiðe wundorlice ond fæstlice, þæt heo ne helt on nane healfe ne on nanum eorðlicum þinge ne stent; ne nanwuht eorðlices hi ne healt þæt hio ne sige: ond nis hire þeah þonne eðre to feallanne of dune þonne up. Ðu eac þa ðriefealdan sawla on geðwærum limum styrest, swa þæt ðære sawle þy læsse ne bið on ðam læstan fingre ðe on eallum þam lichoman. Forþi ic cwæð þæt sio sawul wære preofeald, forþamþe uðwitan secgað þæt hio hæbbe þrio gecynd. An ðara gecynda is þæt heo bið wilnigende, oðer þæt hio bið irsiende, þridde þæt hio bið gesceadwis.¹⁹

Thou didst establish the earth very wondrously and securely, so that it tilts on no side nor rests on any earthly thing; nor does anything earthly hold it so that it does not sink down: and yet it is no easier for it to fall down than up. Thou didst also guide the threefold soul in suitable limbs, so that no less of the soul is in the littlest finger than in all of the body. I said that the soul is threefold because philosophers say that it has three natures. One of those natures is that it is prone to desire, the second that it is prone to wrath, the third that it is capable of discernment.

Alfred turned that *to leoðe* (*Metres*, 20, ll. 161–88), adding the simile of the egg:

Ðu gestaðoladest þurh þa strongan meaht,
weroda wuldorcýning, wundorlice,
eorðan swa fæste þæt hio on ænige
healfe ne heldeð; ne mæg hio hider ne þider
165 sigan þe swiðor þe hio symle dyde.
Hwæt, hi þeah eorðlices auht ne haldeð:
is þeah efneðe up and of dune
to feallanne foldan ðisse.
þæm anlicost þe on æge bið,
170 gíoleca on middan; glideð hwæðre
æg ymbutan. Swa stent eall weoruld
stille on tille, streamas ymbutan
lagufloda gelac, lyfte and tungla,

- and sio scire scell scriðeð ymbutan
175 dogora gehwilce; dyde lange swa.
Hwæt, þu, ðioda god, ðriefalde on us
sawle gesettest, and hi siððan eac
styrest and stihrest þurh ða strongan meaht
þæt hire þy læssa on ðæm lytlan ne bið
180 anum fingre þe hire on eallum bið
þæm lichoman. Forðæm ic lytle ær
sweotole sæde þæt sio sawl wære
þriefald gesceaft þegna gehwilces,
forðæm uðwitan ealle seggað
185 ðætte an gecynd ælcere saule
irsung sie, oðer wilnung;
is sio ðridde gecynd þæm twæm betere,
sio gesceadwisnes.²⁰

Thou hast established wondrously through strong might, Glorious King of Hosts, the earth so firmly that it tilts to no side; it cannot sink down this way or that, no more so than it ever did. Lo, yet nothing earthly holds it: it is, though, as easy for this earth to fall up as down. It is most like to what is in an egg, the yolk in the middle; the egg, however, glides all round it. Thus all the world stands still in place, with the seas around it, the motion of the water-floods, the air and the stars, and the luminous shell takes its course around it every day as it has done since long ago. Thou, O God of Nations, didst place in us a threefold soul, and moreover didst thereafter guide and ordain through strong might that there is no less of it in one little finger than there is of it in all the body. I have just said clearly that everyone's soul is of threefold nature, because philosophers say entirely that one nature of each soul is wrath, another desire; discernment, the third nature, is better than those two.

If Alfred had lived in modern times, his addition of the figure of the egg might have tempted a reader to believe that he sought to achieve the higher level of figurative discourse appropriate to poetry by exercising his imagination, bodying forth in apt comparison what the prose had given in plainer statement. That view

would, of course, assume some degree of poetic excellence in the versified translation; and not all who have commented on its poetic quality have praised it, as, for example, G. K. Anderson: 'The Meters, however, so far as substance goes, contribute nothing that will not be found in the prose version, do not say what they have to say any better, and have the additional drawback of not representing completely the form of the original anyway. All this quite apart from the fact that they are generally poor poetry as poetry.'²¹

A critic of medieval literature, however, soon learns to look for a source when there is an addition; and the simile of the egg has as its source a commentary on Boethius to the effect that heaven together with the earth and sea are shaped in the manner of an egg.²² Since manuscripts of Boethius's *Consolatio*, such as Alfred might have known, seem always to have been accompanied by *scholia*, it is likely that Alfred knew the comparison of earth and sea with an egg. Alfred does not add substantially as he changes his prose translation into verse. We cannot, therefore, generalize from this one instance and say that Alfred — like some moderns — would have thought the addition of an image generically apt for verse. I have quoted his two translations at some length, mainly to illustrate what changes have to be made in rhythm, in providing alliteration and in diction, to turn prose into verse, and not specifically to indicate that one Anglo-Saxon, namely Alfred, thought that simile was, if not especially fit for poetry, at least not unsuited for it.

The exercise by a poet of turning the prose he has written into verse is instructive, but we rarely have the underlying prose to compare with the definitive versified text. For the exemplification of this exercise we may look beyond the confines of Old English literature. One thinks of Goethe's two versions of *Iphigenie auf Tauris*,²³ a whole play transformed with metrical skill difficult to parallel in any language — certainly not in Alfred's Old English, though I think better of his verse than do his detractors. Goethe's metre is unrhyming iambic pentameter. Here is a brief example (from *Iphigenie*, Act III, Scene 1):²⁴

OREST. Verbirgst du deinen Stand und Namen mit Fleiß,
oder darf ich wissen, mit wem ich rede?

IPHIGENIE. Du sollst es wissen. Jetzo sag' mir an, was
ich von deinem Bruder nur halb gehöret, das Schicksal derer,
die von Troja zurück mit ungnädigem Gott ihre Heimath
betraten. Jung bin ich hieher gekommen, doch alt genug, mich
jener Helden zu erinnern, die gleich den Göttern in ihrer
Herrlichkeit gerüstet, dem schönsten Ruhm entgegen gingen.

Sag' mir: es fiel der große Agamemnon in seinem eignen Haus
durch seiner Frauen List?

OREST. So ist es, wie du sagst.

Orestes: Are you carefully concealing your rank and name, or
am I allowed to know who I am speaking to? *Iphigenia*: You
shall know. Now tell me what I have only half heard from your
brother, the fate of those who, back from Troy and the god
ungracious, set foot in their homeland. I came here young, yet
old enough to remember those heroes who — armed in their
splendour like the gods — met with the highest glory. Tell me,
did Agamemnon fall in his own house through his wife's
contrivance? *Orestes*: It is as you say.

In verse the passage reads:

OREST.

Verbirgst du deinen Nahmen, deine Herkunft
Mit klugem Vorsatz? oder darf ich wissen,
Wer mir, gleich einer Himmlischen, begegnet?

IPHIGENIE.

Du sollst mich kennen. Jetzo sag' mir an,
Was ich nur halb von deinem Bruder hörte,
Das Ende derer, die von Troja kehrend
Ein hartes unerwartetes Geschick
Auf ihrer Wohnung Schwelle stumm empfing.
Zwar ward ich jung an diesen Strand geführt;
Doch wohl erinnr' ich mich des scheuen Blicks,
Den ich mit Staunen und mit Bangigkeit
Auf jene Helden warf. Sie zogen aus,
Als hätte der Olymp sich aufgethan
Und die Gestalten der erlauchten Vorwelt
Zum Schrecken Ilions herabgesendet,
Und Agamemnon war vor allen herrlich!
O sage mir! Er fiel, sein Haus betretend,
Durch seiner Frauen und Ägisthus Tücke?

OREST.

Du sagst's.

Orestes: Do you conceal your name, your lineage, with wise resolve? Or may I know who, like a goddess, stands before me? *Iphigenia*: You shall know me. Now tell me this which I have only half-heard from your brother, the end of those, from Troy returning, whom a hard Fate unforeseen received in silence on the threshold of their home. Though I was young when taken to this shore, yet I do well recall the bashful glance which with amazement and with fear I cast upon those heroes. To war they went as if Olympus had undone the gates, and had, in Ilion's terror, sent forth the figures of our glorious past, and Agamemnon more magnificent than all. Oh, tell me, did he fall, entering his house, through his own wife's deceit and that of Aegisthus? *Orestes*: You have uttered it.

Goethe versified by changing to verse rhythms; but on the whole he eschewed German poetic diction of the 1780s. It would have been impossible when, about eight hundred years earlier, Alfred versified his prose translation of the *Metres* to eschew similarly the vocabulary which forms an essential ingredient of Old English verse. Far from it. A comparison of the poetic version of the passage quoted from *Metres*, 20, with the Old English prose underlying it shows such poeticisms as:

<i>wuldorcyning</i>	'Glorious King' (l. 162), the word is poetic only.
<i>fæste</i>	'firmly' (l. 163), common in verse though not confined to it; adverbs ending in <i>-lice</i> (for example, <i>fæstlice</i>) are, however, more common in prose than in verse.
<i>heldeð</i>	'tilts' (l. 164) and <i>haldeð</i> 'holds' (l. 166), both 3rd sg. pres. ind., but unsyncopated, whereas the prose has syncopated <i>helt</i> and <i>healt</i> ; <i>haldeð</i> moreover has unbroken <i>-ald-</i> , in late Old English probably to be regarded as 'Anglian colouring' found in verse; ²⁵ the prose has West-Saxon broken <i>-eald-</i> . <i>Stent</i> 'stands' (l. 171), however, demonstrates that the verse text does not consistently use unsyncopated verbal forms, though here (but not always) the unsyncopated form (<i>standeð</i>) would scan.

- stille on tille* 'still in place' (l. 172); *till* is rare (occurring twice only in Old English, both times in West-Saxon verse), and its sense is uncertain. It is a rhyming phrase; as is the more common *hider ne pider* 'hither and (nor) thither' (l. 164).
- lagufloda gelac* 'motion of the water-floods' (l. 173), is a characteristic poetic phrase, using a nominal compound, to designate the sea, in variation with *streamas*.

In many respects, however, Alfred's verse is not characteristic of Old English poetry. He is, of course, not alone in versifying less strictly than the poet of *Beowulf*. There are also the West-Saxonisms. Syncopated verbal forms like *stent* are quite common. He uses *of dune* 'down' (l. 167) — three times in the *Metres* (here; l. line 80; and 31, line 13), but it is otherwise rare in Old English verse, for example *Judith*, line 290, *Solomon and Saturn*, line 458, and the *Cotton Maxims*, 30, for all of which *of dune* is to be counted as evidence of West-Saxon provenance.²⁶

VI Envoy

In October, 1948, Leslie Rogers and I first met as undergraduates at Oxford. We were tutorial mates, taught as a pair by Stefanyja Olszewska and from time to time by her husband, Alan S. C. Ross. It is unfashionable to say so of one's undergraduate days, but, I think, we worked hard though not always with economy of effort. And we enjoyed the work. Here I only wish to record my debt to Stefanyja and Alan's teaching and friendship over many years till their death, and record also my recollection of that early comradeship with Leslie. For many years we saw little of each other, but not long ago he was on study leave in Oxford, and he delighted Douglas Gray and me and our graduate students by giving us as a seminar paper his discovery, then days old, that the 'John Elphinstone' transcript of *The Battle of Maldon* is, in fact, the David Casley transcript.²⁷

We hope to see much more of Leslie and Lesley Rogers in the near future. Till then, Leslie, by way of *lac ond luftacen*, have these notes on poetry, some of which poetry we first read together about forty years ago.

NOTES

- ¹ I deal more fully with this metrical point in 'The Oldest English Poetry Now Extant', in my *A Collection of Papers with Emphasis on Old English Literature* (Toronto, 1987), pp. 115–38 (pp. 128–29); but my interpretation there of the first half-line is not as given now (following C. J. E. Ball, see note 3). For the standard edition of Old English verse, see *The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*, edited by G. P. Krapp and E. V. K. Dobbie, 6 vols (New York and London, 1931–54). Often, however, I have changed details in the edited texts quoted, after reference to the manuscript or manuscripts concerned, usually in facsimile.
- ² Compare E. V. K. Dobbie, *The Manuscripts of Cædmon's Hymn and Bede's Death Song*, Columbia University Studies in English and Comparative Literature, 128 (New York, 1937), 11–17, 23–24; and N. R. Ker, *Catalogue of Manuscripts Containing Anglo-Saxon* (Oxford, 1957), Nos 25, 122, and 351.
- ³ For this interpretation see C. J. E. Ball, 'Homonymy and Polysemy: A Problem for Lexicographers', in Alfred Bammesberger, *Problems of Old English Lexicography*, Eichstätter Beiträge, 15 (Regensburg, 1985), 39–46 (pp. 39–41); accepted by B. Mitchell, *Old English Syntax*, 2 vols (Oxford, 1985), I, §§ 1515, 3928, and see his 'Cædmon's Hymn, Line 1: What is the Subject of *scylun* or its Variants?', *Leeds Studies in English*, n.s. 16 (1985), 190–97.
- ⁴ *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, edited by B. Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford, 1969), pp. 416–17.
- ⁵ *Musen-Almanach für das Jahr 1800*, edited by J. C. F. von Schiller (Tübingen [1799]), p. 243.
- ⁶ Vulgate: *in manus artificum opera laudabitur* (variant reading: *in manu artificum opera laudabuntur*).
- ⁷ *S. Aurelii Augustini Hipponensis opera*, Volume IV, *Enarrationes in Psalmos* (Venice, 1730), col. 1618 F. Saint Augustine repeats his explanation of *confiteor* in this sense in *Enarratio in psalmum cxlviii*, Section 15 (on Verse 14), col. 1681 D–G.
- ⁸ Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, col. 1449 F–G.

- ⁹ *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, edited by Fr. Klaeber, third edition (Boston, 1950), p. 121.
- ¹⁰ I quote the text of K. Bartsch's edition (revised by H. de Boor), *Das Nibelungenlied*, F. Pfeiffer's Deutsche Klassiker des Mittelalters, 3 (Leipzig, 1949).
- ¹¹ M. Opitius, *Incerti Poetae Teutonici Rhythmus de Sancte Annone* (Danzig, 1639), sig. A (= p. 1).
- ¹² Compare P. O. E. Gradon, *Form and Style in Early English Literature* (London, 1971), p. 157; referred to by P. J. Lucas in the note to his edition of *Exodus* (London, 1977), p. 75.
- ¹³ *The Metres of Boethius* survive only in the damaged British Library MS, Cotton Otho A. vi, but had been transcribed (in Bodleian MS Junius 12) by Franciscus Junius, and that transcript is used to supply readings now no longer legible in Otho.
- ¹⁴ See Colgrave and Mynors, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History*, pp. 416–17. Compare D. P. Kirby, *The Making of Early England* (London, 1967), pp. 211–12.
- ¹⁵ Alain Renoir, 'Point of View and Design for Terror in *Beowulf*', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 63 (1962), 154–67; reprinted in D. K. Fry, *The Beowulf Poet: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1968), pp. 154–66. Renoir's account of these uses of *cuman* in three not widely-spaced lines of the poem is based on that of A. G. Brodeur, *The Art of Beowulf* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1959), ch. 4, especially pp. 90–91. He and Brodeur seem not to have heeded the warning implicit in Klaeber's (I think, uncomplimentary) use of the word 'enthusiasts' for critics whom he does not follow: 'Some enthusiasts have found the threefold bell-like announcement of Grendel's approach a highly dramatic device' [first in his first edition of *Beowulf* (1922), pp. 150–51, and unchanged in the second (1928), and still in the third edition (1936), p. 154]. Brodeur realized that the triple use of *cuman* 'followed by a different infinitive of motion' makes the degree of repetitiousness slight. See also A. C. Bartlett's account, *The Larger Rhetorical Patterns in Anglo-Saxon Poetry*, Columbia University Studies in English and Comparative Literature, 122 (New York, 1935), pp. 49–50.
- ¹⁶ First published as a chapter, 'Beowulf', in E. G. Stanley, *Continuations and Beginnings: Studies in Old English Literature* (London, 1966), pp. 104–41 (pp. 121–25); reprinted in my *Collection of Papers*, pp. 139–69 (pp. 153–56).

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- 17 I follow the manuscript reading *fram Sigemunde*, as do most modern editors, following R. W. Chambers: *Beowulf with the Finnsburg Fragment*, edited by A. J. Wyatt (revised R. W. Chambers, Cambridge, 1914), p. 44, note on line 875.
- 18 Compare B. Mitchell, *Old English Syntax*, II, §§ 3956–57, and the references there given.
- 19 *King Alfred's Old English Version of Boethius, De Consolatione Philosophiae*, edited by W. J. Sedgefield (Oxford, 1899), p. 81.
- 20 G. P. Krapp, *The Paris Psalter and the Meters of Boethius*, The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records, 5 (New York and London, 1933), p. 182.
- 21 G. K. Anderson, *The Literature of the Anglo-Saxons* (Princeton, 1966), p. 282.
- 22 *Caelum et terram mareque in modum ovi dicunt figurari*; see Sedgefield, *King Alfred's Boethius*, p. xxxiii. Compare *König Alfreds Boethius*, edited by K. Otten (Tübingen, 1964), p. 137, note 34.
- 23 The prose version: *Iphigenie auf Tauris erster Entwurf 1779*, J. W. von Goethe, *Nachgelassene Werke*, vol. 17 (=Ausgabe letzter Hand, vol. 57, Stuttgart and Tübingen, 1842), p. 56; the poetic version: *Iphigenie auf Tauris — Ein Schauspiel von Goethe* (Leipzig, 1787), pp. 58–59.
- 24 My colleague F. J. Lampion (Worcester College, Oxford) has drawn my attention to the fact that Goethe's verse rendering of 1787 is related, by way of the prose of the version of 1779, to J. E. Schegel's *Orest und Pylades* (1742) in alexandrines. In an account of how Old English verse can be produced deftly from prose, it would go too far to analyze a further and more remote stratum of Goethe's skill.
- 25 In early West-Saxon, that is, in Alfred's own language probably, manuscripts have both unbroken *-ald* and broken *-eald*; see P. J. Cosijn, *Altwestsächsische Grammatik*, 2 parts (The Hague, 1883–1888), I (1883), pp. 8–11. Compare also E. G. Stanley, 'Spellings of the *Waldend* Group', in *Studies in Language, Literature, and Culture of the Middle Ages and Later*, edited by E. Bagby Atwood and A. A. Hill (Austin, Texas, 1969), pp. 38–69; and further, A. Lutz, 'Spellings of the *Waldend* group — again', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 13 (1984), 51–64.

²⁶ See, however, F. Wenisch, 'Judith — eine westsächsische Dichtung?', *Anglia*, 100 (1982), 273–300.

²⁷ H. L. Rogers, 'The Battle of Maldon: David Casley's Transcript', *Notes and Queries*, n.s. 32 (1985), 147–55.