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Hypallage in the Old English *Exodus*

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The Old English *Exodus* is universally regarded as one of the most difficult –
perhaps *the* most difficult – poetic texts which have come down to us.[1] Its
difficulty lies not only in the desperate state in which the text has been
transmitted, to the point where few lines can be read without the reader having to
confront a textual crux or *locus desperandus*, but also in the poet's highly allusive
and metaphorical diction.[2] The poem is, in effect, an extended meditation on
the liturgical lections for Holy Saturday, which were taken from biblical
Exodus 14. 24-15. 1a;[3] accordingly, although these lections concern the episode
of the Israelites' Crossing of the Red Sea, the poet's concern is not with the
straightforward narration of that event, but with its typological significance for
the Christian catachumen about to be baptized. In the early church, all baptisms
took place at midnight on Holy Saturday, with the lighting of the Paschal Candle
and the symbolic progression from darkness to light: hence the imagery of light
and darkness is central both to the liturgical lections and to the Old English poem.
The *Exodus* is distinctive among Old English poems for the highly figurative
nature of its diction: the language is compressed and metaphorical throughout, so
that its metaphors need to be carefully unpacked by the reader. The reader is
instructed in this reading technique by the poet himself:

> Gif onlucan wile   lifes wealhstod,
> beorht in breostum,   banhuses weard,
> ginfæsten god Gastes   cægon,
> run bið gerecenod,   ræd forð gæð.[4]

This is itself a fitting metaphor for the act of interpreting *Exodus* (the poem as
well as its biblical source) – unlocking the inner truth with the keys of the mind.

In order to understand a poet who construed the act of reading his verse in such terms, it is essential for the modern reader to be attentive to the various devices by which the poet encoded his metaphors. One such device is the use of hypallage, a device which the poet evidently learned from his reading of Latin verse.

Hypallage, or 'transferred epithet', is a feature of Latin poetic diction which invariably poses difficulties for inexperienced readers of Latin verse. Hypallage occurs when an adjective whose meaning relates primarily to one noun is transferred grammatically to another.[5] One Roman poet who made extensive use of hypallage was Vergil.[6] An unambiguous example of the device is found in book V of the *Aeneid*, where Vergil is describing the start of the boat race:

> inde ubi clara dedit sonitum tuba, finibus omnes
> haud mora, prosiluere suis.[7]

Properly, however, it is not the trumpet (*tuba*) which is clear (*clara*), but the sound which it emits: 'tuba dedit clarum sonitum' [the trumpet gave out a clear sound]; the adjective *clarum* has been 'transferred' grammatically from *sonitum* to *tuba*. Or again, when in book IX Vergil is describing the armies of Rutulians who encircle the Trojans' encampment in order to prevent anyone escaping:

> purpurei cristis iuuenes auroque corusci.[8]

Here, once again, it is not the young men who are purple, but their plumed helmets: 'iuuenes cristis purpureis', where the adjective *purpureus* has been transferred from the helmets to the young men.

Vergil was very fond of this device, and it recurs throughout his verse, never more memorably, perhaps, than in his description of Aeneas and the Sibyl setting out through the murk for the depths of the underworld in book VI of the *Aeneid*:

> ibant obscuri sola sub nocte per umbram.[9]

What we have here, in effect, is double hypallage: it is not the travellers, but the night, that is dark (*nocte obscura*), and it is not the night which is lonely, but the two solitary travellers (*soli*).

The device was used by many of Vergil's imitators, notably by Lucan as well as by the Christian-Latin poets who attempted to express the Christian

message in hexameter verse of the highest poetic register.[10] It was these poets who, along with Vergil, were subsequently to form the staple of the Anglo-Saxon school curriculum.[11] A couple of examples will suffice. First, Juvencus, who in book II of his *Euangelia* describes the young man with the withered hand (Matthew 12. 10) who was healed by Christ on the doorstep of the synagogue on the Sabbath itself (in defiance of the Pharisees):[12]

> mox hic iuuenem pro limine cernit,
> siccatum ex umero cui pondus inutile palmae
> pendebat.[13]

But it is not properly the weight (*pondus*) which is withered (*siccatum*), but the man's hand ('palmae [. . .] siccatae'); the adjective *siccatum* has been transferred grammatically from the hand to the weight.

The Christian-Latin poet who used hypallage for the most striking metaphorical effect was Alcimus Avitus, as two examples will make clear. In book I of his poem on the events of Mosaic history (the *Carmina de spiritalis historiae gestis*),[14] Avitus is describing the fountain of Paradise from which the four principal rivers of the world take their source:

> talis in argento non fulget gratia, tantam
> nec crystalla dabunt nitido de frigore lucem.[15]

In these lines it is not the cool (*frigus*) but the crystal that is gleaming (*crystalla nitida*); the adjective *nitidus* (gleaming) has been transferred from the *crystalla* to the *frigus*, creating thereby a brilliant metaphor (gleaming cool, cold glitter). The *Gesta* of Avitus are dense with metaphors of this sort. A final example: in book V Avitus describes the Israelites' Crossing of the Red Sea, and the Egyptians' subsequent destruction in the flood. As the Egyptians flail about in the water, they become impaled on (their own) floating spears, and the coloured water is mingled with red blood:

> ast alii, lassata diu dum brachia iactant,
> incurrunt enses iaculisque natantibus
> concolor et rubro miscetur sanguine pontus.[16]

In one sense this is not properly hypallage: blood is red. But what Avitus is playing upon is the transference of the epithet for the Red Sea – the *pontus ruber* – to the red of the blood of the Egyptians which is mingled in it.

Anglo-Latin poets would have been familiar with the use of hypallage from their reading of Vergil and Christian-Latin poets such as Juvencus and Avitus,[17] and it is not surprising that striking examples of hypallage are found in Anglo-Latin poetry, particularly in the two Anglo-Latin poets who learned most from the study of Vergil, namely Bede and Wulfstan of Winchester. Thus Bede in his *Vita metrica S. Cudbercti* (composed c. 720) describes the departure of St Cuthbert for the seashore in order to pray through the night:[18]

> interea iuuenis solitos nocturnus ad hymnos
> digreditur.[19]

where we have what approaches Vergilian double hypallage: it is the hymns, not Cuthbert, that are nocturnal (*hymnos nocturnos*); and his is the habit, not the hymns' (*solitus*). By the same token, Wulfstan of Winchester, in his *Narratio metrica de S. Swithuno* (composed 992-96), describes a young man who is taken to his own house in a state of paralysis, where his arrival is met with the weeping and wailing of his family:[20]

> duxere ad proprii lugentia culmina tecti.[21]

where it is obvious that it is the man's family, not the roofs of his house, that do the wailing.

Given that the Latin poetry of Avitus, Juvencus and Vergil was widely known in Anglo-Saxon England, and that the device of hypallage was practised by the two most skilful Anglo-Latin poets, Bede and Wulfstan, it should not, in principle, be surprising to find that the device was also employed by Anglo-Saxon poets writing in the vernacular. There are in fact several unambiguous examples of hypallage in the Old English *Exodus*. It is particularly interesting to find that the *Exodus*-poet employs the very instance of hypallage – the 'red waters' for the Red Sea – which we have already seen in Avitus. In the Old English poem, Moses is exhorting the Israelites to hasten across the sea now that the Lord has parted the waters:

> Ofest is selost
> þæt ge of feonda fæðme weorðen
> nu se agend   up arærde
> reade streamas   in randgebeorh.[22]

Here, as in Avitus, the *reade streamas* represent a transference of 'the waters of the Red Sea'.

It would appear from this example that the Old English poet learned this use of hypallage directly from his reading of Avitus. It is therefore reasonable to suspect other instances of the device elsewhere in the poem. Two such passages deserve notice. In the first, a company of Israelites (the third such company), namely the sons of Simeon, advance across the sea:

> þridde þeodmægen   (þufas wundon
> ofer garfare)   guðcyste onþrang
> deawig sceaftum.[23]

The company is said to be 'dewy' (*deawig*) because they are advancing into the sea; but it is properly the spears which are dewy and moist (from the blood they have spilled, or in anticipation of the blood of the Israelites which they intend to spill).[24]

During the narrative of the Crossing itself, the Egyptians could not restrain the onslaught of the waves:

> Ne mihton forhabban   helpendra wað
> merestreames mod,   ac he manegum gesceod
> gyllende gryre.[25]

Here again it is not properly the 'terror' (*gryre*) which is screaming, but the 'many' who scream in terror; the adjective 'shrieking' (*gyllende*) has been transferred from the army (the many) to the terror which they experience.

The language of the Old English *Exodus* is pervasively metaphorical. And insofar as metaphor in general involves the transference of a descriptive term to an object to which it is not properly applicable, so hypallage is a specific kind of metaphor, involving as it does the transference of an adjective from one noun to another. Old English poets could readily have learned the use of this device from their reading of Latin poetry. Certainly there is evidence to suggest that the *Exodus*-poet was familiar with Latin verse. I have argued on another occasion that

the *Exodus*-poet's account of the Red Sea crossing, and the drowning of the Egyptians, was informed by awareness of the figural interpretation of this event by Avitus and Arator, and that his imagery of water mixing with blood as a *figura* of baptism can only properly be understood in light of the Christian-Latin poetic tradition.[26] In the same vein Paul Remley has recently set out an impressive array of evidence linking the diction of *Exodus* with the Latin poetry of Aldhelm.[27] In a word, the metaphorical diction of the Old English *Exodus* can best be understood in the context of the Latin verse which literate Anglo-Saxons studied as part of their school curriculum.[28]

NOTES

[1] Stanley B. Greenfield and Daniel G. Calder, *A New Critical History of Old English Literature* (New York: New York University Press, 1986), p. 212: 'in many ways the most difficult of the Caedmonian poems, and perhaps of all Old English poems'; and cf. Roberta Frank, 'What Kind of Poetry is *Exodus*?', in *Germania: Comparative Studies in the Old Germanic Languages and Literatures*, ed. by Daniel G. Calder and T. Craig Christy (Woodbridge: Brewer, 1988), pp. 191-205 (p. 191): 'The diction of *Exodus* has seemed to modern readers more allusive, more learned, the syntax more wrenched, the layering of meaning deeper than in other vernacular compositions'. In what follows, I generally quote from the edition of Peter J. Lucas, *Exodus*, rev. edn (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 1994); but I have also had recourse to other editions, notably that of J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Old English Exodus*, ed. by Joan Turville-Petre (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981).

[2] There is an incisive account of the *Exodus*-poet's diction by L. Schücking, *Untersuchungen zur Bedeutungslehre der angelsächsischen Dichtersprache* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1915), esp. pp. 8-16.

[3] The relationship of the poem to the Holy Saturday lections was first established by James W. Bright, 'The Relation of the Caedmonian *Exodus* to the Liturgy', *MLN*, 27 (1912), 97-103; it has recently been comprehensively illustrated by Paul G. Remley, *Old English Biblical Verse*, Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England, 16 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 78-87, 168-230. On the symbolism of baptism in the patristic tradition as reflected in *Exodus*, see John F. Vickrey, '*Exodus* and the Battle in the Sea', *Traditio*, 28 (1972), 119-40.

[4] *Exodus* 523-26: 'If life's interpreter [*lifes wealhstod* = the intellect, mind], bright in the breast, the body's guardian, wishes to unlock ample bounties with the Keys of the Spirit, the secret will be explained, the counsel will go forth'.

[5] On hypallage as a feature of Latin poetic diction, see Wilhelm Kroll, 'La lingua poetica romana', in *La lingua poetica latina*, ed. and trans. by Aldo Lunelli, 2nd edn (Bologna: Pàtron Editore, 1980), pp. 1-66 (pp. 27-30), and J. B. Hofmann, *Lateinische Syntax und Stilistik*, rev. by Anton Szantyr, Handbuch der Altertumswissenschaft, 2. 2 (München: Beck, 1965), pp. 159-60 (with bibliography).

[6] On hypallage in Vergil, see A. Wankenne, 'L'Hypallage dans l'oeuvre de Virgile', *Les études classiques*, 17 (1949), 335-42; E. Adelaide Hahn, 'A Source of Vergilian Hypallage', *TAPhA*, 87 (1956), 147-87; and (briefly), both W. F. Jackson Knight, *Roman Vergil* (Harmondsworth: Peregrine Books, 1966), pp. 313-15, and W. A. Camps, *An Introduction to Virgil's Aeneid* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 62.

[7]   *Aen.* v. 139-40: 'and then, when the clear trumpet gave out its sound, without delay all competitors burst forth from their starting-points'.

[8]   *Aen.* ix. 163: 'the young men, purple with their plumed helmets and gleaming with gold'.

[9]   *Aen.* vi. 268: 'they set off through the shadows, the dark ones, beneath the lonely night'.

[10]   See U. Hübner, 'Hypallage in Lucans Pharsalia', *Hermes*, 100 (1972), 577-600, and also Elaine Fantham, *Lucan: De Bello Civili, Book II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 37.

[11]   See Michael Lapidge, 'The Study of Latin Texts in Late Anglo-Saxon England (1): The Evidence of Latin Glosses', in *Latin and the Vernacular Languages in Early Medieval Britain*, ed. by Nicholas Brooks (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1982), pp. 99-140 (repr. in Michael Lapidge, *Anglo-Latin Literature: 600-899* (London: Hambledon, 1996), pp. 455-98).

[12]   *Gai Vetti Aquilini Iuuenci Euangeliorum Libri quattuor*, ed. by Iohannes Huemer, Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum, 24 (Vindobonae [Wien]: Tempsky, 1891).

[13]   *Euang.* ii. 583-5: 'straightway he sees a young man on the doorstep from whose shoulder the withered useless weight of a hand was dangling'.

[14]   *Alcimi Ecdicii Aviti Viennensis Episcopi Opera quae supersunt*, ed. by Rudolfus Peiper, Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Auctores Antiquissimi, 6. 2 (Berlin: Weidmann, 1883), pp. 199-294.

[15]   *Gesta* i. 252-53: 'such great beauty does not gleam in silver, nor will crystal exude such light from its gleaming cool'.

[16]   *Gesta* v. 691-93: 'but others, while they cast about their tired arms, run themselves in with their own swords, and the sea, coloured by the floating spears, is mingled with red blood'.

[17]   The evidence for the Anglo-Saxons' knowledge of Avitus, Juvencus and Vergil is set out fully in Michael Lapidge, *The Anglo-Saxon Library* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), pp. 292, 319, and 335-36 respectively.

[18]   *Bedas metrische Vita sancti Cuthberti*, ed. by Werner Jaager, Palaestra, 198 (Leipzig: Mayer & Müller, 1935).

[19]   *Vita metrica S. Cudbercti*, 220: 'meanwhile the nocturnal young man sets off for his usual hymn-singing'.

[20]   Wulfstan's *Narratio metrica de S. Swithuno* is ed. by Michael Lapidge, *The Cult of St Swithun*, Winchester Studies, 4.2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), pp. 335-551.

[21]   *Narratio metrica* i. 588: 'they took him to the weeping roofs of his own house'.

[22]   *Exodus* 293-96: 'it is best to make haste to escape from the enemies' grasp, now that the Ruler has raised up the red streams in a rampart'.

[23]   *Exodus* 342-44: 'the third company (their standards moved forward above the spear-assembly) pressed forward in a troop, dewy with their spears'.

[24] Tolkien removed this instance of hypallage by emending MS *deawig sceaftum* (two words) to the – otherwise unattested – compound *deawigsceaftan*.

[25] *Exodus* 488-90: 'they could not restrain the helpers' onrush, the anger of the flood, but it destroyed many in shrieking terror'. Note that I read *waδ* ('ranging abroad', hence 'onrush') with Tolkien, rather than the transmitted *paδ* (printed by Lucas); see Tolkien's note, *The Old English Exodus*, p. 63.

[26] Michael Lapidge, 'Versifying the Bible in the Middle Ages', in *The Text in the Community: Essays on Medieval Works, Manuscripts, Authors, and Readers*, ed. by Jill Mann and Maura Nolan (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), pp. 11-40 (pp. 25-28).

[27] Paul G. Remley, 'Aldhelm as Old English Poet: *Exodus*, Asser, and the *Dicta Ælfredi*', in *Latin Learning and English Lore: Studies in Anglo-Saxon Literature for Michael Lapidge*, ed. by Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe and Andy Orchard, 2 vols (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), I, 90-108 (pp. 92-94).

[28] I am very grateful to Andy Orchard for commenting on an earlier version of this article.