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W. H. AUDEN AND 'THE "BARBARIC" POETRY OF THE NORTH': UNCHAINING ONE'S DAIMON

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Seamus Heaney's recent translation of *Beowulf* reminds us that Old English poetry can hold a strong attraction for modern poets. This essay examines Auden's debt to the earliest English poetry, beginning with a summary of his experience of the subject at Oxford. A detailed examination of *Paid on Both Sides*, Auden's first professionally published work, forms the bulk of the essay. Numerous allusions to specific Old English poems are identified, many for the first time, and more general rhetorical and metrical influences are analysed. These are related to the central theme of the work, tribal violence. It is argued that some of the imitations of Old English in *Paid* can be read as juvenile experimentation, but that several years later these experiments paid handsome dividends in *The Age of Anxiety*, which develops and refines many of the devices and concerns of *Paid on Both Sides*.

In Auden's 'commonplace book', *A Certain World*, compiled in 1970 as the poet approached old age, there is an entry devoted to 'Anglo-Saxon Poetry'. Auden reproduces there Michael Alexander's translation of *Deor*, 'one of my favourites'.[1] He also records that Old English was his 'first introduction to the "barbaric" poetry of the North', despite being eventually superseded in his affections by 'the best poems of the Elder Edda', which he had then recently translated, together with Paul Taylor.[2] Hungry for new forms, as a young poet Auden was drawn to the exoticism of Old English. He recalled that he was 'immediately fascinated both by its metric and its rhetorical devices, so different from the post-Chaucerian poetry with which I was familiar'. Other poets had made use of Old English before Auden. Ezra Pound, for example, made an ebullient translation of *The Seafarer* in 1911, and later incorporated its idiom into the *Cantos*. Auden's importance is that he is the first Saxonizing poet to be widely accepted within the mainstream of British poetic tradition

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1 W. H. Auden, *A Certain World: A Commonplace Book* (London, 1971), 22–4.

2 A selection of these appeared in 1969 as *Elder Edda*. A complete volume was not published in Auden's lifetime; *Norse Poems*, trans. W. H. Auden and P. Taylor, 2nd edn. (London, 1983), p. vii.

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and to hand back to that tradition an Old English poetic which does not call great attention to itself. Part of the explanation for this is to be found in his educational background.

Auden's first encounter with this '"barbaric" poetry of the North' was at Oxford. In 1925 he went up to Christ Church to read biology, switching to English in summer 1926.[3] His reminiscences of studying Old English at Oxford are well documented; he was not set alight by the approach of Charles Wrenn, his main instructor in the subject: 'Wrenn was so much a philologist that he couldn't read anything beyond the words.'[4] Although not unique, the remark is hardly a just one, as Wrenn's sympathetic introduction to *Beowulf* as a literary experience attests.[5] Nor should we place too much trust in a judgement made forty-four years after graduation by a poet with good reason to be defensive about his academic achievement. Auden's retrospective criticism of Wrenn may be self-justification for spectacular failure in his final examinations, for, to the great surprise of his contemporaries, he received a third-class degree. After the Old English paper he was found in tears by fellow student Bill McElwee (although Spender attributes this, not to disappointment, but to extreme tiredness).[6]

The Second Public Examination in the Honour School of English Language and Literature set in Trinity Term 1928 consisted of fifteen papers and a variety of special subject options.[7] The first four of the papers were given over entirely to linguistic matters (Gothic and Old Icelandic Philology, Old English Philology, Middle English Philology, and History of the Language). The fifth paper was divided into two, indicating a choice between Old English Texts (a), and Old English Texts (b). Presumably it was one of these papers which reduced Auden to tears. Although slightly more literary than the Old English Philology paper, Old English Texts nevertheless posed questions such as: 'What do you know of any differences between the first and second hand in the *Beowulf* MS, in respect of forms and spellings used, liability to error, and general characteristics?' (paper V(a), Q. 5); 'How do you account for the general dialectal colouring of the text of (*a*) *Beowulf*, (*b*) the *Wanderer* and *Seafarer* as they have come down to us?' (paper V(a), Q. 11); 'Give examples (*a*) of spellings and forms in Old English texts that indicate an *early* date, (*b*) of features of the language or poetical texts that are derived from other dialects than West Saxon' (paper V(b), Q. 6), as well as questions on the historical forms of specific words, the reconstruction of Old English pronunciation, and the relevance of *i*-mutation to the grammar and translation into Old English

3 H. Carpenter, *W. H. Auden: A Biography* (London, 1981), 45 and 52–3.

4 From an unpublished interview with Robert H. Boyer, 11 Jan. 1972, quoted ibid. 55.

5 *Beowulf and the Finnesburg Fragment*, trans. J. R. Clark Hall, 3rd edn., rev. C. L. Wrenn (London, 1958), 1–19.

6 Carpenter, *Auden*, 80.

7 Oxford University Examination Papers (Oxford, 1928).

(paper V(b), Qs. 3, 7, 8, 11). A student who considered philological abilities to be an impediment to reading poetry (as Auden seemed to claim in the 1972 Boyer interview) is clearly unlikely to have equipped himself to cope successfully with a 'literature' paper that asks questions such as these. Auden doomed himself to failure by not playing the same game his examiners were playing.

Nor did he profess (again with hindsight) to be engaged by J. R. R. Tolkien's lectures on Old English poetry, remarking: 'I do not remember a single word he said.'[8] Yet it was Tolkien who first fired his passion for Old English: 'at a certain point he recited, and magnificently, a long passage of *Beowulf*. I was spellbound. This poetry, I knew, was going to be my dish.'[9] The spell endured long after Auden had left Oxford: 'Anglo-Saxon and Middle English poetry have been one of my strongest, most lasting influences', he wrote in 1962. Likewise, mutual admiration between the poet and the Oxford don grew deeper until their deaths, both in September 1973. Auden celebrated Tolkien's seventieth birthday with 'A Short Ode to a Philologist' (published in a volume co-edited by the same Wrenn who was 'so much a philologist' that he couldn't read the poetry), and on Auden's sixtieth birthday Tolkien replied with an original composition in Old English (with facing translation), dedicated to 'Wystan my friend'.[10] The strength with which the magic of Tolkien's performance gripped the young Auden's imagination surprised many of his contemporaries. Betjeman later recalled, with a mixture of feigned shock and distaste, how Auden 'really admired the boring Anglo-Saxon poets like Beowulf [*sic*] whom we had read in the English school'.[11] The remark illustrates how unconventional it still was to feel that Old English possessed anything a young poet could learn from.

Yet learn Auden did, as his earliest professionally published work, *Paid on Both Sides*, demonstrates. This (mostly verse) play, or 'charade' as the title page has it, was drafted in Auden's final year at Oxford, perhaps at the expense of his studies. Two years later, having been extensively rewritten in Berlin, it was published in 1930 in Eliot's *Criterion*.[12] The title alludes to lines from *Beowulf*, although very few readers can have been aware of this. John Fuller did not record the debt in his *Reader's Guide to W. H. Auden*,[13] although the reference is now dealt with in some detail in his 1998 revision and expansion of the guide.[14]

8 W. H. Auden, *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* (London, 1963), 41.

9 Ibid. 41–2.

10 P. E. Szarmach, '*Anthem*: Auden's *Cædmon's Hymn*', in R. Utz and T. Shippey (eds.), *Medievalism in the Modern World: Essays in Honour of Leslie J. Workman* (Turnhout, 1998), 329–40: 338–9.

11 S. Spender (ed.), *W. H. Auden: A Tribute* (New York, 1975), 44.

12 *The English Auden: Poems, Essays and Dramatic Writings 1927–1939*, ed. E. Mendelson (London, 1977), pp. xiii–xiv.

13 London, 1970.

14 *W. H. Auden: A Commentary* (London, 1998), 20.

In *Beowulf*, after the hero has dispatched the monster Grendel, Grendel's mother returns by night to the Danish hall of Heorot in order to avenge her son. She kills Æschere, a favourite of the Danish king and, in accordance with the ethic of the heroic code, has satisfied the blood feud which had become her responsibility: Æschere's life is equal to, and payment for, her son's life. At this point (lines 1304–6), the poet remarks: *Ne wæs þæt gewrixle til, | þæt hie on ba healfa bicgan scoldon | freonda feorum* ('Nor was that a good exchange, that they had to pay on both sides with the lives of friends').[15] Fuller remarks that 'this allusion is simply to the motif of the vengeful mother',[16] a motif that is certainly critical to the narrative of *Paid*. However, bringing the full context of the source to bear on the title, *Paid on Both Sides* also provides a moral criticism of the feud-driven, heroic ethic that dominates the play (as the *Beowulf*-poet's aside also seems to undermine the heroic value-system). Such a reading of the title feeds into the critique which *Paid* develops of its world's axiology.

Exactly the same phrase, *on ba healfe*, is used again by the *Beowulf*-poet in line 2063[17] (also noted by Fuller), anticipating the outbreak of renewed hostilities between the Danes and the Heathobards, despite the union of Freawaru and Ingeld and the pact sworn by their families at the time of their marriage vows. However, the 'both sides' formula is yet more deeply embedded in *Beowulf*, for a slight variation on the phrase is used once more in the context of a blood feud, during the retelling of the Finnsburh episode. In an attempt to end the slaughter between Finn's followers and Hnæf's, an oath of peace is sworn *on twa healfa* ('on the two sides', line 1095).[18] That this oath is later broken and violence re-erupts (despite Finn's marriage bond with Hildeburgh), further illustrates that Auden's use of the phrase to title a work in which wedding vows provide only the briefest interlude of peace between two warring factions is much more than the 'simple' invocation of the vengeful mother motif.[19]

Obscure as the title is, the rest of the play is scarcely more limpid, but one might briefly summarize it as a dramatization of the inner conflict between the desire of the id and the repressive ego. This is the allegorical heart of *Paid*, and in order to flesh out its dramatic skeleton Auden marshals as many cultural references to conflict as he can. The familial feuds of the Icelandic sagas are evoked by the play's surface narrative, which deals with the continuation of the generational feud between the Nowers and the Shaws.[20] Echoes of the trench

15 *Beowulf: A Student Edition*, ed. G. Jack (Oxford, 1994), 106.

16 *Commentary*, 20.

17 *Beowulf*, ed. Jack, 149.

18 Ibid. 92.

19 Another variant occurs at line 800 of the poem, when we are told that Beowulf and Grendel intended to strike *on healfa gehwone* ('on each side', i.e. they both intended to strike each other). See *Beowulf*, ed. Jack, 74.

20 A favourite item in Auden's childhood library was Morris and Magnusson's *Icelandic Stories*. See C. Osborne, *W. H. Auden: The Life of a Poet* (London, 1980), 12.

warfare of the previous decade are strangely filtered through the war-games-as-competitive-sport mentality of the schoolboy cadet force: while planning to ambush the Shaws, and after reconnaissance of the area, John Nower tells his kinsman George: 'pick up your men and get some sandwiches made up in the kitchen. I'll see about the ammunition if you will remember to bring a compass.'[21] In addition, Auden brings racial antagonism into the play's field of reference by giving several of the Nowers German names such as Walter, Kurt, and Zeppel, while among the Shaws are characters with Jewish names such as Aaron and Seth. Most of the place names in the play are generic northern names with Anglo-Danish etymologies (Kettledale, Hammergill, Garrigill), a detail that hints at the uneasy coexistence of two Germanic peoples in the north of England for so many generations. Furthermore, the feuds of the American Wild West are conjured up by the name 'Red Shaw', and underlying all is a gender conflict: a conflict that is only temporarily resolved in the figure of 'man-woman' in the dream sequence at the centre of the charade. Perhaps more specifically this is a mother–son conflict (something Auden felt himself to have endured). For in a device reminiscent of *Njal's Saga* (in which women goad men to bloody feuding),[22] it is Seth Shaw's mother who incites him to extend the feud by killing John Nower, just at the moment when his marriage to Anne Shaw had promised to end it. The final chorus remarks (somewhat unconvincingly) that in the perpetuation of tribal violence, the male is defeated and that 'his mother and her mother won'.[23] In such a kaleidoscope of conflicts, the deployment of motifs and mannerisms from Old English poetry is not window-dressing. As its title suggests, the internecine Germanic feuds depicted in *Beowulf* and *The Fight at Finnsburh* are analogous to the concerns of *Paid on Both Sides*. Auden deliberately excavates an archaeological language of violence through which to voice his theme.

Paid opens with an exchange between Trudy and Walter, two of the Nowers:

T. You've only just heard?
W. Yes. A breakdown at the Mill needed attention, kept me all morning. I guessed no harm. But lately, riding at leisure, Dick met me, panted disaster. I came here at once. How did they get him?
T. In Kettledale above Colefangs road passes where high banks overhang dangerous from ambush. To Colefangs had to go, would speak with Layard, Jerry and Hunter with him only. They must have stolen news, for Red Shaw waited with ten, so Jerry said, till for last time unconscious. Hunter was killed at first shot. They fought, exhausted ammunition, a brave defence but fight no more.[24]

21 *The English Auden*, ed. Mendelson, 4.

22 *Njal's Saga*, trans. M. Magnusson and H. Pálsson (London, 1960), 200, 214, 239–40.

23 *The English Auden*, ed. Mendelson, 17.

24 Ibid. 1–2.

Immediately noticeable is the elliptical and paratactic style of the dialogue. A variety of different types of words have been pared out of Trudy's and Walter's speech. Only one definite article has survived, while five others we might have expected to find have been dispensed with.[25] Similarly pronouns and possessive adjectives are omitted where context clarifies the incomplete syntax,[26] and even the noun 'men' is only understood from its preceding adjective 'ten' (now effectively a noun; arguably 'men' would be virtually redundant in any case). Auden is prepared to do without subjects, modal verbs, and even main verbs where the complement will supply all this information.[27]

In part, the breathlessness of these staccato lines is due to the urgency and tragedy of the events that Trudy and Walter are sharing with the audience. Auden is manipulating the style of telegraphic communication which relates such weighty news, but it is not unreasonable to suggest that he is also mimicking the spare, understated narrative of Old English battle poetry. Certainly the admiration for men who died in 'brave defence but fight no more' is a sentiment entirely in keeping with poems such as *The Battle of Maldon* and *Beowulf*. This collocation of style and sentiment strongly argues for a deliberate use of the conventions of Old English poetry. The inversion of 'To Colefangs had to go', and the use of the modal 'would' with the force almost of a full verb do not detract from this impression, although individually they could both be seen as general archaic effects, rather than specific Saxonisms.

In keeping with this Old English mode is the absence of conjunctions, particularly of co-ordination. Instead clauses are juxtaposed, marked off from each other by the simplest of punctuation, commas and periods.[28] One can construe relationships of co-ordination and subordination between these units, just as a translator of an Old English poem might choose to turn the paratactic movement of the original syntax into more idiomatic modern English; a syntax regulated by a system of markers, a more 'policed' sentence structure. Yet such a way of reading either Old English verse or these imitative lines of Auden's imposes a set of grammatical assumptions which are alien to the way the words are put together. The syntax moves ahead incrementally: it is additive rather than hierarchical, proceeding in short, muscular bursts. That the movement of syntax is inextricably bound up with the movement of thought hardly needs stating: this is writing where, in Edward Dahlberg's words (cited by Charles

25 'Panted [the] disaster', '[the] road passes', 'they must have stolen [the] news', 'till for [the] last time' and 'killed at [the] first shot'.

26 'To Colefangs [he] had to go' and 'exhausted [their] ammunition'.

27 The phrase 'I guessed no harm' has suppressed 'there would be' from its centre; the reader probably supplies something like 'he fell' before the word 'unconscious'; and, if 'fight' is a verb, then the final sentence lacks 'they (will)'.

28 Details of punctuation and layout have been checked against the version of *Paid on Both Sides* printed in Auden, *Poems*, 2nd edn. (London, 1933). The only difference in this passage is that *Poems* includes a half-line of leading between each speaker.

Olson), 'one perception must immediately and directly lead to a further perception'.[29]

I have called this exchange 'writing' rather than poetry, for it is not set on the page according to the conventions of verse (as other passages in the play are), but according to those of dramatic prose; in a justified block, set with a hanging indent following the speaker's initial. In manuscript, Old English is also preserved in 'prose form' (the whole page is used from the extreme left to extreme right margin). As scholars started to understand the prosodic measures of Old English poetry more clearly, it became conventional for modern editions to print the poetry in lines of two 'verses' separated by a caesura (after some early experiments with printing one verse to the line). Following a similar 'editorial' procedure we might re-lineate Walter's and Trudy's main speeches as follows:

Yes. A bréakdown at the Míll   néeded atténtion,
képt me all mórning.   I guéssed no hárm.
But látely, ríding at léisure,   Díck met me, pánted disáster.
I cáme here at ónce.   Hów did they gét him?
In Kéttledale above Cólefangs   róad pásses   5
where hígh banks overháng   dángerous to ámbush.
To Cólefangs hád to go,   would spéak with Láyard,
J́erry and Húnter   with hím ónly.
They múst have stólen néws,   for Réd Shaw wáited with tén,
so J́erry sáid,   till for lást time uncónscious.   10
Húnter was kílled   at fírst shót.
They fóught, [*pause*]   exháusted ammunítion,
a bráve defénce,   but fíght no móre.

Such a lineation makes visible a very audible verse structure within this 'prose' block of type, just as early editors of Old English manuscripts came to realize that the solid blocks of script they were looking at recorded poems. Some remarks need to be made about my lineation, for scansion is not an exact science but the exercise of subjective judgement, and there are certainly places in which my resetting of Auden's lines is arguable. First, I have recorded stress as my ear hears, often contradicting the description of Old English as detailed by scholars, who deem it unlikely, for example, that verbs will carry a main stress within a half-line (particularly if that half-line contains two nouns). However, for the lines above to sound at all natural, verbs do need to carry stress, and indeed they are often found in a half-line which does not have two (or sometimes any) nouns. Nor are secondary stresses marked (often heard in compounds), although these play an important part in the overall aural effect. I hear them on '-down', '-dale', '-fangs', 'banks',[30] and 'Shaw'.

29 C. Olson, 'Projective Verse', *Poetry New York*, 3 (1950), repr. in J. Scully (ed.), *Modern Poets on Modern Poetry* (London, 1966), 272–82: 273.

30 Although 'overhang' could take stress on its first syllable, making 'hang' a secondary stress, this is more likely if the word is a noun: as a verb my reading is preferable.

Such editorial interference reveals a regular 'half-line' of two main stresses, like the Old English verse, with the exception of lines 3, 9, and 12 (my numbering). Lines 3 and 10 I have scanned as 'hyper-metric' lines of six stresses. The first half of line 13 can only reasonably carry one stress, an instance in Old English so rare that editors have sought to amend the perceived error of a text which records such a measure. There is no such problem here however. Working towards the narrative climax of this passage, the weight of what is being said seems to demand a significant pause after 'fought'; in effect a blank stress. This preserves the isochronous balance of each stich as it is delivered. Even if one takes exception to my interpretation of such equivocal details, the general point is not invalid, that a rhythmic movement remarkably similar to that of Old English poetry is being employed in this paragraph, and visually obscured by the typesetting. This movement basically consists of units of two stresses (arranged into groups of four in my resetting). Auden, like many other twentieth-century writers on prosody, seems to have considered this as the underlying pattern of all English verse, even heard 'under' the patterns of accentual syllabics. Alan Ansen reports that on 7 May 1947 Auden told him:

You know, the basic English line has four stresses. The language seems to go by twos and fours—that's why you have to say 'a *fuck*ing *day*.' French works on an entirely different principle. I wonder whether they have anything like it in German. In the *Beowulf* line you keep hearing the base in blank verse—it seems so silly to talk about 'iambic pentameter'—but most of the lines really only have four stresses. For instance 'in *hid*eous *ru*in and com*bus*tion *down*.'[31]

The reader will notice that alliteration is not employed as an integral part of the *Paid* measure. Lines 8 and 13 are alliterative in 'permissible' Old English (ab bc); lines 5 and 6 are 'illegal' patterns (aa bc).[32] However, the actual rhythms used in each half-line are quite accurate in their imitation of Old English. Students of Auden's generation at Oxford were expected to know Sievers's system of 'five types', and while Auden obviously did not apply himself to every aspect of his studies as rigorously as he might, anything that offered new technical knowledge about the making of verse is unlikely to have escaped his scrutiny.[33] Every half-line that can be scanned here conforms to one of Sievers's five types, by far the most common being type A and type B. It would be impossible to describe these movements in any meaningful way with the language of accentual syllabics because Auden varies the number of unstressed syllables in the dips, as is typical in Old English poetry. Dealt the injustice of such a terminology the approximate isochronous equivalence of A- and B-type half-lines would disintegrate into a mosaic of trochees and

31 A. Ansen, *The Table Talk of W. H. Auden*, ed. N. Jenkins (Princeton, 1990), 61.

32 The sound-patterning is much more intricate than an account of the alliteration suggests; note the near rhyme of '-fangs' and '-hang' and 'Cole-' and 'stolen'.

33 See Second Public Examinations, paper V(a), Q. 3 and paper V(b), Q. 5.

dactyls, or iambs and anapaests that disguise rather than reveal the underlying regularity of the rhythm.

What also becomes apparent once we start looking at this passage as verse is that every punctuation mark appears to mark the end of a rhythmic half-line (which is not the same thing as saying that every half-line is marked off by punctuation). So the punctuation, although not consistent, serves a metrical purpose, reflecting one of the apparent uses of pointing in Old English poetic manuscripts (although fixed conventions do not seem to have existed and metrical points may have been used only to clarify ambiguity). Not only are the opening lines of the play imitative of Old English narrative poetry, but they are visually imitative of the way that poetry looks on the page. Just as the setting of the play blurs the boundaries between modern England and the lawlessness of medieval Iceland, so the typesetting of these words blurs our understanding of the boundary between prose and poetry; we see the conventional signs of one, but hear the noises of another. In a variety of ways *Paid* defamiliarizes the familiar.

This opening passage establishes a Saxonist palette of rhythms and syntax which typifies much of the rest of the play. Whenever the register shifts from the colloquial we find elements of this Saxonized style.[34] For example, the first chorus of *Paid* beings:

> Can speak of trouble, pressure on men
> Born all the time, brought forward into light.[35]

Immediately audible is the organization of the accentual rhythm into four beats per line, divided by a strong mid-line caesura (punctuated with the comma). More significantly, the first phrase is strikingly like the opening rhetorical gambit of *The Seafarer*: *mæg ic be me sylfum soðgied wrecan* ('I can tell a song of truth about myself').[36] This device may have been indicative of a formulaic opening for poetry of complaint; *The Wife's Lament* has a similar construction in its second line (*ic þæt secgan mæg*).[37] Auden's 'can speak of trouble' is therefore, a variation on variations. By omitting the first person pronoun, Auden's modal verb is kept in first position (where it also occurs in *The Seafarer*), and while the subject of the chorus's speech may indeed be 'true', the truth its speaker can profess is that of mutual mistrust and enmity. In general the five choruses of *Paid* are typified by a kind of weary, gnomic wisdom, won from hard experience, reminiscent of the Old English elegies.

As Fuller has noted, the original first chorus (now assigned to Walter)

34 The first, unpublished version of *Paid* also began with a heavily Saxonist passage, a chorus which draws directly on *The Wanderer*. This chorus is later edited and given to Walter, several scenes into the charade. See the first appendix to *The English Auden*, ed. Mendelson (pp. 409–16).

35 *The English Auden*, ed. Mendelson, 2.

36 The Exeter Book, ed. E. Van Kirk Dobbie and G. Krapp, Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records 3 (New York and London, 1936), 143.

37 Ibid. 210.

makes use of expressions and themes from *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*.[38] The first line is a close paraphrase of *oft him anhaga* (line 1 of *The Wanderer*), while the second stanza appears to echo the sentiment of lines 48–52 from *The Seafarer*.[39] The reader is also alerted to resonance with *The Wanderer* by details such as 'death of friends', for the *eardstapa* of that poem has suffered *winemæge hryre* (line 7, 'death of kinsmen') and is called *freondleas* and *wineleas* (lines 28 and 45, 'friendless').

> Often the man, alone shut, shall consider
> The killings in old winters, death of friends.
> Sitting with stranger shall expect no good.
>
> Spring came, urging to ships, a casting off,
> But one would stay, vengeance not done; it seemed
> Doubtful to them that they would meet again.
>
> Fording in the cool of the day they rode
> To meet at crossroads when the year was over:
> Dead is Brody, such a man was Maul.
>
> I will say this not falsely; I have seen
> The just and the unjust die in the day,
> All, willing or not, and some were willing.[40]

Like the *wræcca* or exile of Old English elegy, this solitary man of whom Walter talks is isolated from his social milieu. Deprived of kith and kin, his only companion is a 'stranger'; one of the accepted meanings of the word *wræcca*. Entirely consistent with this Saxonesque theme of exile is the tenor created by the use of the modal verb 'shall' (compare lines 37, 65, 70, and 73 of *The Wanderer*, where *sceal* has the force of 'must') and the Germanic understatement of the litotical 'I will say this not falsely' (again a kind of variation on *mæg ic be me sylfum soðgied wrecan*): we recall that the rhetorical effects, as much as the metrical effects, of old English seized Auden's imagination. Furthermore, Auden is also prepared to invert subjects and complements ('Dead is Brody, such a man was Maul'); a perfectly legitimate syntactical pattern in an inflected language such as Old English, but a more deviant idiom in uninflected Modern English. Later in life, Auden described his edenic world in an essay called 'Reading', published in 1948. The language of Eden should be 'of mixed origins like English, but highly inflected'.[41] About the same time (1947), Auden is reputed to have remarked; 'it's a shame I can't write lines backward as they could in inflected Icelandic'.[42] His early poetry attempts exactly that feat.

Nor is the stoic fatalism of the final statement without relevance to the rhetoric of 'barbaric' northern poetry. Without the comfort and protection of

38 *Commentary*, 24.

39 Exeter Book, ed. Dobbie and Krapp, 134 and 144.

40 *The English Auden*, ed. Mendelson, 5.

41 *The Dyer's Hand*, 6.

42 Ansen, *Table Talk*, 22.

his *comitatus* (the warrior band loyal to a Germanic lord), the figure in this monologue offers a warning about where blood feuds lead. The heroic code demands that one avenge the killing of one's *cynn*; it is for this reason that 'one would stay', resisting the seasonal stimulus to travel and emigration: indeed Dick Nower walks away from 'vengeance not done', while his brother John remains to be killed. In *The Battle of Maldon*, to die while avenging one's kinsmen is unequivocally the right and honourable thing to do. The last line of Auden's 'Often the man' passage may recall that, in *Maldon*, some of the East Saxons are unwilling to die and that they flee the battlefield dishonourably. The just are killed gloriously, attempting to avenge their lord, without whose protection the lives of the unjust, fleeing the field, are worthless. However, in *Paid*, the situation is not so clear-cut. Speeches such as this chorus invest the will to vengeance with a certain amount of dignity, in accord with the heroic ethos. Yet at the same time we are reminded of the brutal outcome of such a code pursued to its logical end; the destruction of social communities through killing or driving individuals away. The moral ambiguity of *Paid* aligns it less with *Maldon* and more with *Beowulf*, a poem which is also referred to in these lines. Hengist's enforced over-winter stay with Finn[43] is hinted at in the line, 'but one would stay, vengeance not done'. In fact vengeance, or *gyrnwacu*, is exactly what Hengist's thoughts turn to once spring arrives and the summer thaw allows him to leave by ship (lines 1136 ff.).[44] Auden's previous line, stating that 'spring came urging to ships, a casting off', is therefore much more likely to refer to this episode of *Beowulf* than it does to *The Seafarer*, as Fuller asserts. Such a reading certainly accounts for the logic of 'but' (Hengist should leave at the first signs of spring, but stays in order to take vengeance). Moreover, the final line of this *Beowulf* stanza echoes Hrothgar's prediction, made when Beowulf is taking is leave of him, that they will not meet each other again.[45]

Structurally, this chorus is built from a first stanza modelled on *The Wanderer*, a second mined from *Beowulf*, a third which is reminiscent of ambush scenes from the Icelandic sagas, and a fourth which expresses the aphoristic fatalism of Old English gnomic poems such as *The Fates of Men*. *Paid on Both Sides* can be seen as an attempt to write a synthesis of two different genres of Old English poetry, the heroic (including *Beowulf*) and the elegiac.

While acknowledging the Old English allusions and sentiments in this 'Often the man' passage, it would be an incomplete account of the subject that did not deal with the extraordinary choice of typographical layout for these lines. Where else can one read Saxonesque verses arranged into tercets? Most of the lines are conventionally Old English from a metrical point of view, and

43 Lines 1125 ff.: *Beowulf*, ed. Jack, 95.

44 Ibid. 96.

45 Lines 1873–6: *Beowulf*, ed. Jack, 137.

all can be scanned as having four main stresses, although a few have an ambiguous caesura. Yet to shape such lines into a stanzaic pattern which is indelibly associated with poetry from romance languages (and in particular with Dante) is unprecedented. No rhyme scheme necessitates this arrangement; rather, each stanza marks a discrete and logically complete rhetorical period. Despite the lack of a rhyme scheme, the fusion of Old English metres and the patterns of romance stanza-shapes is yet more evidence of the young Auden's precocious technical skill and of his desire to overturn our expectations of poetic form.

Further typographical experiments with Saxonesque rhythm are made in the section immediately following Walter's elegiac three-step. The stage directions inform us that Nower, George, and Sturton enter: '*The Three speak alternately*'. Three eight-line stanzas, and one seven-line stanza, follow:

> Day was gone Night covered sky
> Black over earth When we came there
> To Brandon Walls Where Red Shaw lay
> Hateful and sleeping Unfriendly visit.
> I wished to revenge Quit fully
> Who my father At Colefangs valley
> Lying in ambush Cruelly shot
> With life for life.
>
> Then watchers saw They were attacked
> Shouted in fear A night alarm
> To men asleep Doomed men awoke
> Felt for their guns Ran to the doors
> Would wake their master Who lay with woman
> Upstairs together Tired after love.
> He saw then There would be shooting
> Hard fight.
>
> Shot answered shot Bullets screamed
> Guns shook Hot in the hand
> Fighter lay Groaning on ground
> Gave up life Edward fell
> Shot through the chest First of our lot
> By no means refused fight Stephen was good
> His first encounter Showed no fear
> Wounded many.
>
> Then Shaw knew We were too strong
> Would get away Over the moor
> Return alive But found at the ford
> Sturton waiting Greatest gun anger
> There he died Nor any came
> Fighters home Nor wives shall go
> Smiling to bed They boast no more.[46]

46 *The English Auden*, ed. Mendelson, 6.

Much of what was said regarding the opening section of the play and the terse, linguistic texture of the narrative is clearly applicable to these lines also. John Fuller remarks on 'the general reliance of the speech on the narrative formula of Old English heroic poems'[47] and usefully compares 'Edward fell' with lines 117–18 of *The Battle of Maldon*: *Eadweard anne sloge* | *swiðe mid his swurde*.[48]

However, many other parallels and similarities also suggest themselves here. Although a simple enough device, the setting of mood through nature ('Day was gone Night covered sky | Black over earth') might be another deliberate echo from *The Wanderer*.[49] 'I wished to revenge Quit fully | Who my father At Colefangs valley | Lying in ambush Cruelly shot' echoes the desire to avenge one's lord expressed at several points in *The Battle of Maldon*. Heroic poetry is also evoked by use of the epithet 'doomed' for the Shaw menfolk (*fæge* is used four times in *Maldon* and twice in *The Battle of Brunanburh*[50]), and the night alarm which wakes these doomed men to their deaths recalls Grendel's first attack on Heorot. *The Fight at Finnsburh* also contains the detail that warriors run to the doors when they realize they are under attack,[51] and an allusion to the story of Cynewulf and Cyneheard may be likely, given that King Cynewulf is taken unawares by Cyneheard's ambush while visiting his mistress's chamber.[52] Moreover, Stephen 'showed no fear', as the Saxons in *Maldon* are said to be *unearge* ('unafraid') in,[53] and he 'wounded many', just as it is said of Æscferth that *æfre embe stunde he sealde sume wunde* ('continually he inflicted some wound').[54] Shaw's attempt to escape 'over the moor' (the landscape of evil and danger in Anglo-Saxon culture) can be likened to the cowardly flight of Odda's kin and Godric in *Maldon*. In *Paid*, however, the coward is an enemy of the narrators and he pays for his cowardice with his life. Finally, the remark that the Shaws 'boast no more' calls to mind *The Battle of Brunanburh*, in which we are told repeatedly of the defeated warriors that they had 'no need to boast' of their exploits in battle: *hreman ne þorfte* (line 39), *Gelpan ne þorfte* (line 44), and *hlehhan ne þorftun* (line 47).[55]

Besides these references to *Maldon* and *Brunanburh*, there are many other devices which draw more generally on the genre of heroic poetry. The special attention given to the first casualty is a typical device, the understated praise of Edward's bravery ('By no means refused fight') is entirely conventional.[56] The

47 Fuller, *Commentary*, 24.

48 *The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems*, ed. E. Van Kirk Dobbie, Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records 6 (New York, 1942), 10.

49 Lines 103–4: Exeter Book, ed. Dobbie and Krapp, 136.

50 *Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems*, ed. Dobbie, 16–20.

51 Lines 14–16: *Beowulf*, ed. Jack, 213.

52 H. Sweet, *An Anglo-Saxon Reader in Prose and Verse*, 13th edn. (Oxford, 1954), 1–3.

53 Line 206: *Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems*, ed. Dobbie, 12.

54 Line 271: ibid. 14.

55 Ibid. 18–19.

56 See e.g. lines 74–8 of *The Battle of Maldon*: ibid. 9.

use of 'would' as a full verb ('wanted') has already been commented on in the first passage of the play. 'Nor' is repetitively used as an opening rhetorical device, as it often is in Old English poetry, and, finally, 'gun anger' is surely modelled on *ecghete* ('sword-hate'), from line 84 of *Beowulf*.[57] Blending the style of Old English poetry and the weaponry of modern warfare may seem incongruous, but these lines dispel any doubts about the efficacy of ancient forms in dealing with twentieth-century struggle. One is reminded of Robert Graves's sense of the personal relevance, to men who had spent nights in the trenches in fear of death, of passages such as that where Beowulf lies waiting for Grendel during the night.[58]

Again, the layout of these lines is of particular interest. Unlike the opening passage of *Paid*, here Auden sets out two verses to a line in the manner in which modern editors have chosen to lineate Old English poetry. The caesura is not marked here with a gap, but a second capital letter in the middle of the line indicates the start of the second stich. This appeal to Old English rhythmical patterning through lineation and letter case makes these lines much easier to scan than those of the opening dialogue, and we have visual confirmation of how sparing Auden is with slack syllables in these verses. Often the two lifts of a half-line are separated merely by one dip ('Fighters lay' and 'Wounded many') and occasionally the half-line forms a pure spondee ('Hard fight' and 'Guns shook').[59] Unlike the opening passage, punctuation is almost absent here: it is unnecessary, given the use of upper case, to mark the stichic periods with pointing. Instead a point is used to end each verse paragraph, in addition to which the first and second stanzas contain an extra point at positions when a new subject is actually stated in the next verse ('I' and 'He' respectively). In common with the opening passage, this use of punctuation is not applied with total consistency. 'Bullets' is a different subject from 'Shot', but no mark separates them. Nor is a point used to divide sentences at the most ambiguous point of the passage. In the third stanza I believe it is Edward, 'First of our lot', who 'By no means refused fight'. Yet without a mark to keep this clause from 'Stephen was good', one might draw the conclusion that 'By no means refused fight' is in apposition to Stephen; particularly as they occupy the same line and one's eye is tempted to draw them together.

Each stanza is used to mark out a major episode of the narrative, so that the regular strophic pattern is determined by the matter of the poem rather than being an aural period: or, to put it more accurately, Auden disciplines himself to fit the matter of each narrative episode into a stanza of a fixed length. In this sense stanza organization is being used in a similar way as in Walter's 'Often the man' speech. Yet there is a residual visual appeal to acoustic patterning

57 *Beowulf*, ed. Jack, 33.

58 Robert Graves, *Good-bye To All That* (London, 1929), 362.

59 Cf. Auden as reported by Ansen: 'English produces spondees without effort. For an uninflected language it's a real achievement.' Ansen, *Table-Talk*, 62.

present in the first three of these stanzas, even though in one sense this 'double-pattern' (to use Richard Bradford's terminology)[60] is redundant. The final half-line with which each of the first three stanzas ends recalls the 'bob' or burden-like tail-end rhyme which closes variable-length fits of Middle English alliterative poems such as *Gawain*. As previously stated, no rhyme patterning 'justifies' the shape of these stanzas, and this also holds true for the half-line bobs. They do share a certain semantic value, all being concerned with deadly struggle ('With life for life', 'Hard fight', 'Wounded many'), but this is hardly surprising, given the narrative of the whole passage. One possibility is that Auden is mimicking the way in which Old English poetry frequently initiates a major change of syntactic direction with the *b*-verse of a line, rather than with the *a*-verse (something he more clearly imitates in *The Age of Anxiety*). True, he does not start each stanza with an indentation to the position of a *b*-verse, but the parallel is approximate rather than accurate. This may explain why the fourth stanza does not end with such an eighth-line bob: the end of the whole section does not demand a 'mid-line' break to indicate new subject-matter within this specific narrative, but rather an end to the whole convention which has been established for this passage.

It seems that Auden is enjoying being able to configure his alliterative, imitative lines in a number of different visual permutations, just as early editors had to decide on conventions for the visual presentation of Old English poetry.[61] What, for example, does it mean to use lineation, letter case, and stanza breaks to indicate the aural and subject-matter organization of a passage of verse when the ideal audience for that verse is presumably not a reader, but a spectator? One conclusion is that the over-investment in layout of verse on the page is an indication that Auden's main field of interest is not really drama at all, but poetry. More sympathetically, one might argue that these visual signals are encoded stage directions to the cast on how to read the verse. The instructions for this passage are that Nower, George, and Sturton are to 'speak alternately'. How much material they are each to speak alternately is not at all clear, although the fact that there are four stanzas presumably rules out alternating these. A change of speaker after each line is of course possible, although this means that one speaker will occasionally utter two half-lines not syntactically connected ('To men asleep' is the complement of the previous line and not related to its *b*-verse 'Doomed men awoke'), a possible source of confusion. Nor would the line-by-line alternation of three speakers impose the regular shape of each paragraph-stanza onto the performance.

Alternation by half-line removes the problem of one actor delivering syntactically unrelated lines. Instead each half-line is delivered in isolation, and patterns of apposition, addition, variation, and juxtaposition are discerned

60 R. Bradford, *The Look of It: A Theory of Visual Form in English Poetry* (Cork, 1993).

61 One of the reasons *Deor* may have appealed to Auden is that it is a curious hybrid of the Anglo-Saxon accentual line and of strophic organization (which we think of as a Latinate structural device).

by the listener incrementally and contingently, as is appropriate to the original performative context of Old English poetry. Furthermore, proceeding by half-lines in threes provides a satisfying symmetry; each speaker delivers five half-lines in every stanza, before a new paragraph-stanza is begun again, in the voice of the same first speaker each time. It is possible then that Auden is trying to use visual codes to notate the oral performance of his poetry; the capital letter at the start of each half-line indicates, to the cast, a change of speaker, and, to the reader, a change of stich. In this sense Auden's Saxonist work is in sympathy with the communal, performative, and social aspects of Old English poetry.

In the next chorus, the reader is presented with some generalizing wisdom about the seasons, which may be based upon the gnomic tradition of Old English. It employs a list-like passage based on the rhetorical opposition of 'there 'and 'here'—'War is declared there, here a treaty signed; | Here a scrum breaks up like a bomb, there troops | Deploy like birds'—which recalls the Old English device of variation. Furthermore, the chorus laments the fate of a man isolated from his friends, who, just like the *comitatus*-bereft speaker of *The Wanderer*, dreams of the pleasures of the mead-hall ('folk in dancing bunches, | Of tart wine spilt on home-made benches'). This same figure of exile 'comes thence to a wall. | Outside on frozen soil lie armies killed | Who seem familiar but they are cold.' These lines undoubtedly refer again to *The Wanderer* ('then the wine-halls crumble, rulers lie, deprived of joy, the company all fallen, proud by the wall'),[62] and perhaps also to *The Ruin*.[63]

These references are not just clever undergraduate allusions, however. As often as Auden invokes the world of the ancient, heroic North, he undermines the values commonly associated with it. When called as a witness in the dream-like sequence at the centre of *Paid*, the character 'Bo' refers to 'days during the migrations',[64] which is perhaps meant to suggest the ancient migrations of the Germanic tribes, from which period dates so much of the heroic material common to the Old English *scops*, Norse *skalds* and their Continental cousins. Bo testifies that 'By loss of memory we are reborn, | For memory is death', a statement which has significance to the psychological drama developed in *Paid*. The proximity of this remark to the mention of 'migrations' also calls to mind that Germanic poets were the historians of their peoples and kept the memory of the tribe's deeds in currency, from generation to generation. Bo may also be offering a critique of the function of the poet in heroic society: it would be better for all concerned if these tribal lays of feuding and vengeance could be forgotten, for the commemorative poem is an incitement to future violence.

The proffered solution to this constant warring between factions is the same

62 My translation of lines 78–80, Exeter Book, ed. Dobbie and Krapp, 136.

63 Ibid. 227–9.

64 *The English Auden*, ed. Mendelson, 8.

as that exemplified in the heroic code by poems like *Beowulf*, and has already been touched upon. In her role as *freoðwebbe* ('peace-weaver'),[65] a woman from one faction is given in marriage to a man of the other. Just as Hildeburh is given to Finn,[66] and as Freawaru is joined with Ingeld,[67] so John Nower and Anne Shaw are to be married. The effectiveness of this solution is, in both works, nil. Aaron ironically announces 'Now this shall end with marriage as it ought'.[68] Yet within a few short scenes Anne's kinsman Seth murders her fiancé, and so perpetuates the feud.

Building up to this climactic murder, the chorus asks:

> For where are Basley who won the Ten,
> Dickon so tarted by the House,
> Thomas who kept a sparrow-hawk?[69]

Fuller notes that this is a further evocation of *The Wanderer*, echoing its *hwær cwom* passage.[70] This is undoubtedly true, although it is worth noting that the Old English formula is used to mouth the loss of an English public school community, just as public-school high jinks and Icelandic sagas are blended elsewhere. One might speculate that the plaques which commemorate old boys killed in the Great War, often found in the main hall of an English school, might well lie behind this passage. Nor is it fanciful to note that Thomas's sparrowhawk is likely a recapitulation of the *hafoc* ('hawk') which Offa's kinsman releases before battle in *The Battle of Maldon*.[71]

In any case, the speaker of *The Wanderer* seems to have been a presiding genius for Auden's chorus passages, for the closing chorus of the play expresses the same kind of stoicism in the face of man's mortality which is evident in the final sections of *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*. Sentiments such as 'though he believe it, no man is strong',[72] and the thwarting of man's expectations of material happiness on earth, recall how the speaker of *The Wanderer* insists that all earthly comforts are *læne* ('transitory') and that the wise man understands how helpless one is in the face of *wyrd*, or fate.[73]

Motifs and formulae from Old English battle poetry are used in *Paid* to develop the play's material of confrontation and feud; *Maldon*, *Beowulf*, and *Brunanburh* are (together with Norse sagas) the foundation stones of literary conflict upon which the drama is built. Some purposeful use is also made of

65 Line 1942: *Beowulf*, ed. Jack, 141.

66 See the Finnsburh episode, lines 1068–1159: *Beowulf*, ed. Jack, 90–8.

67 See lines 2016–69: ibid. 145–9.

68 *The English Auden*, ed. Mendelson, 13.

69 Ibid. 15.

70 Lines 92–5: Exeter Book, ed. Dobbie and Krapp, 136; Fuller, *Commentary*, 34.

71 Line 8: *Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems*, ed. Dobbie, 7.

72 *The English Auden*, ed. Mendelson, 17.

73 Lines 107–10: Exeter Book, ed. Dobbie and Krapp, 137.

the elegiac tradition in Old English poetry. Auden does not use poems such as *The Seafarer* and *The Wanderer* to lament the passing of men and women (as Pound does in the *Cantos*), but he fastens on to the self-reflexive angst of the speakers of those poems (as only a post-Freudian could), and with it escalates the internal psychological conflict that the play seeks to dramatize at an almost allegorical level. Although I have termed the anxiety of the speakers of Old English elegies as 'angst', it is a stoic angst, if such a phrase be possible. Auden preserves this yoking of despair and endurance, so that these two attitudes, locked in embrace, dominate the mood of most of the characters in the play. Physical escape is the only way to break free, as exemplified by Dick's departure. Auden works this elegiac mode into the play mainly through the choruses. This prevents his psychological (mis)-reading of the speakers of the Old English elegies from becoming too self-reflexive: it never becomes the unburdening of the troubled soul of one of the play's named characters, but part of a pattern in the overall weft of the work. 'Pattern' might be too generous a word to use, for the use of the elegiac mood (unlike the battle poetry) is not at all consistent. Some choruses are characterized by a full deployment of borrowings, both specific and general, from poems such as *The Wanderer*; other choruses are devoid of such elements. To be fair to Auden, *Paid* is clearly a juvenile and experimental work, and his experiments certainly bear later fruit. Auden is working out what to do with the themes of Old English as much as he is working out how to incorporate the metrical possibilities of Old English into the medium of printed verse, dominated for so long by conventions of accentual syllabics and romance-derived stanzaic patterns. One of the most interesting features of the Old English debt in *Paid on Both Sides* is its employment of at least three distinct and unique typographical strategies for displaying Saxonist rhythms.

According to Humphrey Carpenter, in a letter to John Pudney in April 1931, Auden wrote: 'In general the further away from you in time or feeling that poets are, the more you can get out of them for your own use. Often some piece of technique thus learnt really unchains one's own Daimon quite suddenly.'[74] In a sense, *Paid on Both Sides* is a practice poem. Auden's Daimon was suddenly unchained, in part by the technique of distant Old English poets, in his Second World War poem *The Age of Anxiety*. Analysis of that poem demands a separate article, although suffice it to say that, in *The Age of Anxiety*, *Beowulf* and *The Battle of Maldon* become contemporary, while the horrors of the Second World War become part of a universal cycle of human violence. Rosetta, one of the poem's characters, says that the wrongs of the present day seem:

74 Carpenter, *Auden*, 55; the letter is now in the Berg collection of the New York Public Library.

> Moulds and monsters on memories stuffed
> With dead men's doodles, dossiers written
> In lost lingos[75]

Auden clears the mould and monsters from these voices of the past and recovers the lost lingo of Old English to teach us of our present evils.

St Andrews

75 W. H. Auden, *Collected Poems*, ed. E. Mendelson, 2nd edn. (London, 1991), 461.