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This article is one of a series of short essays, collectively titled “Further Explorations,” published as part of a special issue of *Oral Tradition* in honor of John Miles Foley’s 65th birthday and 2011 retirement. The surprise Festschrift, guest-edited by Lori and Scott Garner entirely without his knowledge, celebrates John’s tremendous impact on studies in oral tradition through a series of essays contributed by his students from the University of Missouri-Columbia (1979-present) and from NEH Summer Seminars that he has directed (1987-1996).

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The Old English Verse Line in Translation: Steps Toward a New Theory of Page Presentation

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In *How to Read an Oral Poem*, John Miles Foley (2002:104-05) produces an ethnopoetic translation of the opening lines of *Beowulf*, focusing on a structural approach that highlights the poem's major units and patterns in an effort to make today's audience more fluent in the traditional register.¹ Considering the poem's previous presentations, he writes (104):

These conventional editions and translations aren't moving toward *Beowulf* and Anglo-Saxon poetics, but rather toward a "party-line" or consensus concept of what poetry ought to be—how it ought to look and how it ought to work. Since Anglo-Saxon poetics overlaps with this modern concept to some degree, since its terms converge in some ways with our terms, any such presentation can claim ethnopoetic progress. But along with that illusory progress comes the distortion inherent in converting a poem to something it isn't, in reading it into submission.

Anyone who visits a major library and looks through the dozens of translations of *Beowulf* or anthologies of Old English poetry more generally can easily see that verse translators usually give little attention to the page presentation of the poem, despite the great differences in prosodic systems employed in the target language (heroic couplets, blank verse, free verse, attempts at recreating the alliterative meter of the original, and so on), and in terms of visual lineation most translations of *Beowulf* resemble the stacked whole-lines of Chaucer or Milton. The questions I wish to pursue in this short essay center therefore on the presentation of Old English verse in translation (rather than on the presentation utilized by critical editions): with respect to lineation, what are the default presentations typically employed by verse translators, and how might new directions in graphic representations enhance our understanding of Old English poetics in translation? To pursue these questions, I will use the short lyric *Cædmon's Hymn* as an example

¹ It is a joy to present this note in honor of John Miles Foley, who is of the mold the *Gifts*-poet described so succinctly (ll. 94b-95a): Sum bið boca gleaw, larum leoþufæst ("One is learned in books, skillful in his teachings").

text, briefly illustrating my process of translation and then suggesting some new ways to format the translated text.²

The initial task of the verse translator of Old English is to determine what if any rearranging of verses (half-lines) and smaller grammatical constituents is necessary. While it is possible to produce a verse-by-verse rendering of *Cædmon's Hymn*, some minor adjustments allow the clauses to be recast into more familiar syntactical units. Whether or not Old English meter can be reproduced in present-day English is a difficult question.³ While the short answer to this question is *no*, it is possible to re-create a likeness to the original meter. What follows is a verse translation in which I have used a base pattern of two stresses per half-line, though by necessity about a third of the verses contain three primary stresses in translation.⁴ Alliteration is generally present, but it is no longer meter-governing. The half-lines are fused together in this presentation and I have indicated in brackets to the right my slight syntactical adjustments. Other choices are too minor to warrant comment.

Nu sculon herigean heofonrices weard,
 meotodes meahte and his modgeþanc,
 weorc wuldorfæder, swa he wundra gehwæs, 3
 ece drihten, or onstealde.
 He ærest sceop eorðan bearnum

² My desire to answer these questions is in part a response to the challenge issued by Heather Maring (2003), who has urged subsequent scholar-translators of Old English poems to employ the structural ethnopoetic techniques exemplified by Foley (2002). While my brief consideration of lineation will fall short of demonstrating the many structural ways in which ethnopoetics can aid our readings of Old English poems, at the very least I hope to promote a reevaluation of our practices of lineation by demonstrating the complex relationship between our visual and aural perceptions of lines.

³ The question involves moving away from the idea of Old English meter in collective terms and toward the individual metrical characteristics of the poem being translated (for example, taking into account how half-line types are paired in specific lines for particular effect, rather than selecting unsystematically from a grab-bag of numerous verse types and subtypes). Even in cases where present-day cognates seem to fit the pattern outlined in the original, often linguistic changes in stress or mora can alter metric values. If, for example, I wanted to reproduce the exact meter of *frea ælmihtig* (/ / \ x) while maintaining the cognate “almighty,” I could not do so with my current rendering “God almighty” (/ x / x) unless I provided a gloss for a now-unnatural pronunciation “ALL-might-y.” The two-trochee rendering I have is, of course, a very common verse structure in Old English poetry, but it is not a reproduction of the meter of line 9b. The more a translator strays from the meter of individual verses, even if translating them into other acceptable verse patterns in Old English, the more one moves away from the meter of the original poem and fails to reproduce it all.

⁴ It is often the case that secondary stress in Old English gets promoted to full stress in present-day English. For example, *heofonrices weard* (/ (x) \ x /) in my translation becomes “the protector of heaven’s kingdom” (x / x x x / x / x). Here and in the previous footnote the metrical notation is common among Anglo-Saxon metrists: / marks a primary stress, \ marks a secondary stress, and x marks an unstressed syllable. The (x) notation for the second syllable of *heofon* shows the metrical rule of resolution, which occurs when a primary stress is occupied by a syllable whose vowel or diphthong is short by nature and position, thereby sharing the stress over two syllables instead of one. The most important item to consider in this example from verse 1b and my translation of it is the shift from *-rices* (\ x) to “kingdom” (/ x). Secondary stress provides for interesting metrical discussions that this note is unable to examine more fully. But I do think that in many cases secondary stresses would have been sounded with comparable aural values to those of primary stresses; thus, allowing three primary stresses to exist in translation in a non-hypermetric verse can often point back to the original meter more authentically than a translation that seeks somehow to maintain only two primary stresses in every verse.

heofon to hrofe, halig scyppend;	6
þa middangeard moncynnes weard,	
ece drihten, æfter teode	
firum foldan, frea ælmihtig. ⁵	9
Now we must praise the protector of heaven's kingdom,	[1a / 1b]
the might of the maker and his mind's purpose,	[2a / 2b]
the labors of the glorious father—everlasting Lord—	[3a / 4a]
because he brought about each wondrous thing's beginning.	[3b + 4b]
At first he fashioned heaven as a roof	[5a / 6a]
for mankind's children. Then he—holy creator	[5b / þa + 6b]
and protector of people—prepared this middle ground,	[7b / 8b + 7a]
the whole earth, for human beings—	[9a]
everlasting Lord, God almighty.	[8a / 9b]

This is the point where the work of the verse translator of Old English often seems to stop. Whether presentation choice occurs before, during, or after the translation process, the translated work usually resembles one of a few predictable formats: lineated with fused half-lines (as exemplified in my translation above), lineated with a- and b-verse separation (utilized by most critical editions, as exemplified above by the Old English text), or lineated with each verse given the space of a full line, as in the following example:

Now we must praise
the protector of heaven's kingdom,
the might of the maker
and his mind's purpose,

Sometimes, too, in this format the b-verse is indented to illustrate a clearer connection to the a-verse:

Now we must praise
the protector of heaven's kingdom,
the might of the maker
and his mind's purpose,

The advantage of these last two displays is that they aim to preserve the verse-to-verse pulse on which Old English meter is grounded. But to my ear (and eye) the problem of maintaining this format continually, especially in a long narrative poem, is that a reader might be prompted to pause excessively at each medial verse break (now turned into a line break) and thus read aloud in a rhythm that is sometimes at odds with the less pause-friendly syntactical rhythm of present-day English. Conversely, the whole-line display with fused a- and b-verses erases the visual

⁵ Text is from Dobbie 1942:106.

rhythm offered by these short-line presentations. Yet maintaining whole-line integrity and subsuming the b-verse visually has the advantage of promoting an unbroken aural rhythm in the lines where a medial pause would be at odds with the natural grammatical rhythm of the translation, such as between the verb “praise” and its object “the protector of heaven’s kingdom” in line 1 of the above translation. To be sure, these are all productive ways to look at an Old English poem in translation since the Old English poetic line cannot be said to have any one correct graphic representation. The Old English line exists, of course, but originally at least it did not exist as a visual construction.⁶

The relationship between the visual representation of a poem and its sonic output is more complex than some readers of poetry today may realize. Like so many other readers, I was taught in school at an early age not to pause at the end of a line that did not have punctuation. But strategies for reading enjambed lines should be various, differing a great deal among works of purely oral or written composition and, as is the case for Old English poetry, among works with a compositional history that is a complex fusion of oral and written traditions. Generally speaking, an orally composed poem, particularly one with musical accompaniment, is more likely to employ a pause at the end of each line, whether or not enjambment is present.⁷ And even in purely written traditions any rules for pausing at line breaks showing enjambment seem to be more dependent on the rhythm of language than on an absence of punctuation marks.

Dana Gioia (1987:398-400) nicely illustrates this divide between visual and sonic constructions in his evaluation of William Carlos Williams’s “The Red Wheelbarrow,” which he shows to be a free-verse poem only in its visual arrangement of sound. The four-stanza eight-line poem appears thus on paper:

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens.

Gioia argues that what is heard is actually two lines of blank verse:

⁶ Even pointing in certain manuscripts—the scribal practice of placing an elevated *punctus* after the b-verse or, with greater frequency toward the end of the Anglo-Saxon period, after both the a- and b-verses—is a stronger indicator of a scribe’s degree of familiarity with the poetic tradition than of some widespread belief that lines or verses should be demarcated visually. On scribal pointing, see O’Brien O’Keeffe 1990.

⁷ Hear, as one of numerous possible examples, Halil Bajgorić’s performance of the South Slavic epic *The Wedding of Mustajbey’s Son Bećirbey* (Foley 2005), available online at <http://www.oraltradition.org/zbm/>.

so much depends upon a red wheel barrow
glazed with rain water beside the white chickens

Although no punctuation is present in Williams's poem, there is a natural desire to pause between the voicing of "barrow" and the past participial phrase that modifies it. Like Gioia, I too read the poem aloud in the same manner each time, whether I am reading it as an eight-line or two-line construction. In addition to the meaning of its words, then, a portion of the poem's power and enduring popularity is the result of its rearranging familiar sounds into an unfamiliar visual format.

The interplay between the visual and aural constructions of lines should be of crucial importance to the verse translator of Old English poems. Visual lineation is not an aspect of Old English prosody, but it is an aspect of all present-day prosodies in English, even including those employing some type of metrical line (since measured and unmeasured poems alike are recognized as poems first by their page-bound lineation and second, if at all, by the arrangement of their sounds).⁸ The increasingly uniform a-verse/b-verse presentation of critical editions of Old English poems is, I think, the most productive way to look at the Old English text.⁹ But I do not think verse translators should have a default presentation in mind—or at least be wedded to one—before or during the translation process. Certainly the act of translating depends on sonic representations of verses (a hypothetical 1a / 1b / 2a / 2b in Old English might be translated mimetically in present-day English, or as 1a + 2a / 1b / 2b, or any other number of ways), and the verse translator will write out whole- and half-lines in aurally pleasing arrangements on scraps of paper with an idea of those sonic properties in some kind of uniformly visual display, but the final arrangement just might be a better representation of Old English prosody if it is placed on the page in a manner that does not suggest that the Old English line has a correct way (or even a few correct ways) to be shown. Perhaps the best way to demonstrate this resistance to "correct" formatting would be to provide different side-by-side layouts of the same translated poem.

Below I have reformatted my translation of *Cædmon's Hymn* to show three alternative ways to read and view the work. This first presentation is a somewhat minor restructuring of the whole-line display shown earlier, yet the inclusion of more white space distances the poem from false alignment with later poetic traditions in which a stacked whole-line display is the norm. The spaces come at places where a natural pause in the rhythm of the language is already present, so their effect for most readers—I imagine—will show the visual parsing of units rather than adjust the sonic output of how the poem is read. In the cases of lines 1, 4, and 5, I did not

⁸ Today, there are only two exceptions to recognizing a poem first by visual lineation. The first occurs when someone is reading aloud (or reciting or orally composing) a measured poem to an audience capable of hearing the metrical divisions. The second occurs when one engages with a prose poem—which is not analogous to an Old English poem in its manuscript context. Both are written out in a run-on style, but of the two only the Old English poem contains lines, though it is not visually lineated.

⁹ But see Doane 1994, with its illustrative edition of Charm 4 (*Wið færstice*), which lays out the text in unpunctuated and heavily spaced word clusters. Doane has organized these clusters according to the scribe's word spacing, which he interprets as a reflection of the rhythm of uttered phrases. Doane's divisions of utterances often diverge from the half-line divisions of Dobbie's (1942) edition.

include medial white space because I did not want to encourage a mid-line pause; the rhythm of those lines is best read without a pause until the close of each line:¹⁰

Now we must praise the protector of heaven's kingdom,

the might of the maker and his mind's purpose,
the labors of the glorious father —everlasting Lord—

because he brought about each wondrous thing's beginning.

At first he fashioned heaven as a roof
for mankind's children.

Then he —holy creator
and protector of people— prepared this middle ground,
the whole earth, for human beings—

everlasting Lord, God almighty.

My second presentation resembles the typical look of Old English poems in their manuscript contexts, though modern punctuation has been maintained in order to avoid jarring the reader. It is not based on any of the manuscript versions of *Cædmon's Hymn* but is instead meant to show the word, word cluster, and run-on line spacing in manuscripts more generally.¹¹ An advantage of viewing the translated poem in a manuscript-inspired context is that it might encourage the reader to carve out his or her own performance of the lines:

Now we must praise the protector of heaven's kingdom, the might
of the maker and his mind's purpose, the labors of the glorious father,
everlasting Lord, because he brought about each wondrous thing's
beginning. At first he fashioned heaven as a roof for mankind's chil-
dren. Then he, holy creator and protector of people, prepared this
middle ground, the whole earth, for human beings, everlasting Lord,
God almighty.

Being perhaps the most experimental format, my third presentation places primary and secondary stresses in bold and forgoes the use of commas. Having the stressed syllables highlighted may have more of a visual effect than a sonic one (readers do not need to think about where to place stress since stress is the result either of the natural stress or stresses in a

¹⁰ Since the rhythm of the target language in this case often promotes whole-line fluidity, I do not see a solely verse-by-verse inspired presentation—which is so handy in critical editions and has been utilized uniformly by other translators of Old English verse—as a viable option.

¹¹ See the CD-ROM accompanying O'Donnell 2005 to view images of *Cædmon's Hymn* in a variety of manuscript contexts.

multisyllabic word or of a monosyllable's weight with respect to its surrounding sounds), but the use of bold for certain syllables may also allow the visual to influence the aural and thus provide a more energized reading. In either case an advantage of seeing the stresses is that it calls attention to how the rhythm has been constructed, showing a similarity to—*though not a reduplication of*—Old English meter:

Now we must **praise** the **protector** of **heaven's kingdom**
 the **might** of the **maker**
 and his **mind's purpose**
 the **labors** of the **glorious father**
everlasting Lord
 because he **brought about** each **wondrous thing's beginning**.

At first he **fashioned heaven** as a **roof**
 for **mankind's children**.

Then **he**
holy creator and **protector** of **people**
prepared this **middle ground**
 the **whole earth**
 for **human beings**

everlasting Lord
God almighty.

The above presentations are in no way definitive. They invite a rearranging, and they resist the static nature of textual display. It is possible that readers unfamiliar with Old English poetics could encounter these presentations and make mistaken assumptions about Old English prosody. Is this free verse? Is it prose? Misconceptions can always be present for those encountering a language and tradition for the first time, even in translation when the new work must be a blend—to whatever degree—of prosodic elements from the source and target languages. But the page presentation of Old English poems and their translations remains arbitrary if that presentation does not aim to highlight at least some feature of its prosody, whether structural or performative. I can imagine translations of *Beowulf* and other Old English poems that forgo visual lineation while maintaining a sonically uniform rhythm, and I can imagine other translations whose lines are sonically uniform yet whose graphic representations are assembled in accordance with other principles—principles that might vary by scene, theme, dialogue, and so on. Ultimately, such representations have the ability to highlight prosodic elements on the page while also suggesting that the content is not quite at home there.

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