

## One a bird bore off: Anglo-Saxon and the elegiac in *The Cantos*

Formando di disio nuova persona  
 One man is dead, and another has rotted his end off  
 Et quant au troisième  
 Il est tombé dans le  
 De sa femme, on ne le reverra  
 Pas, oth fugol othbaer:

(*The Cantos*: 27/129)

*Fashioning a new person from desire/One man is dead, another has rotted his end off/And as to the third, he fell into the/...of his wife, you won't see him/again, One a bird bore off.* (My translations)

‘Canto 27’ opens with a collage assembled from four languages; mediaeval Italian, Modern English, Modern French and some not-quite-remembered Old English. Line seventeen of Cavalcanti’s ‘Ballata 12’, which Pound had translated in 1910, provides the source of the Italian (*T*, 124-7). No source or reference appears to have been identified yet for the French; whether Pound fashioned these lines himself or lifted them from another text might well be unknowable now. The ‘correct’ wording of the Old English is *sumne fugel oþbaer* (‘a bird bore away another one’), borrowed from line 81 of *The Wanderer* (*The Exeter Book*, 136). If by ‘oth’ Pound did actually intend a deliberate emendation to Anglo-Saxon *oþ*, then the line translates as ‘until [or when] a bird bore off’. This possibility cannot be discounted, although (notoriously) Pound frequently quoted from memory, introducing the tiny distortions which memory inevitably does.

‘Canto 27’ jumps more abruptly and more abstrusely from one piece of material to another than do most of the early cantos, but the thread that seems to run through this opening *bricolage* concerns the disappearance or demise of individuals. ‘Ballata 12’, is also known by its opening line which Pound translates ‘If all my life be but some deathly moving’. The poem expresses a love-sickness so strong that the poet feels himself to be in a state of living death. In the second line of the present canto, the theme of mortality becomes clearer and more literal. Rhetorically, this line is reminiscent of the formulaic pattern *sume... sumne...* (‘one man... another...’) with which the poet of *The Wanderer* enumerates the fates of men who died in battle. It is also this passage of *The Wanderer* (lines 80b - 84b) that Pound has raided for his phrase; ‘oth fugol othbaer’. That Pound should have stored away in his memory rhetorical devices from *The Wanderer*, as well as individual phrases from the poem, ought to come as no surprise: Fred Robinson has more than adequately demonstrated that this poem had an

abiding position in Pound's affections and that he returned to it throughout his career (Robinson, 203-4).

By the knowing lacuna where we expect to read of that part of his wife into which 'the third one' fell, the French lines are bawdy in tone, rather than elegiac. Nevertheless the disappearance of 'the third' is as irreversible as death, reminding us that in the French language sexual climax, *le petit mort*, is a metaphorical death. Is it this *troisième*, or yet another who is born away by the wanderer's bird? In any case, in the Anglo-Saxon poem which Pound alludes to, the speaker 'lose[s] all companions' (*The Cantos*, 1/5). One by one (*sume... sumne...*), he is stripped of his fellow warriors until he remains: the last survivor. So the subject rhyme of this passage with the Odysseus of 'Canto 1' is clear, and with Pound too, with the benefit of hindsight, although it may not have been so clear in 1927. Some forty or so years later however, having been through the wars both literally and metaphorically, Pound mourned the passing of yet another of his old companions (Eliot) with the plaintive 'who is there now for me to share a joke with?' (Tytell, 336). The pitiful similarity to Odysseus and to the speaker of *The Wanderer* was more apparent.

Perhaps less obvious is the development of the subject within 'Canto 27', for after the bird bears one off (or 'when', if we accept that Pound's alteration is not a slip), we are presented with British preparations for the Great War; a war in which 'one', and 'another', and yet another will be taken away in battle. Curiously, the *fugel* in line 81 of *The Wanderer* has also been glossed as 'ship', initially by Benjamin Thorpe (a notable nineteenth-century editor of Anglo-Saxon poems) and more recently by Krapp and Dobbie (twentieth-century editors of the complete corpus of surviving Anglo-Saxon poetry), although Pound could not have learnt it from the latter pair until 1936, too late for the composition of this canto (see Leslie's note in *The Wanderer*, 88). It may seem unlikely that Pound would have known of Thorpe's suggestion, but in the St. Andrews University Library copy of the seventh edition of Henry Sweet's *An Anglo-Saxon Reader* (the same edition Pound used, see Robinson, 209-12), a student has pencilled a marginal gloss to this line of *The Wanderer*; 'fig. = 'ship' (Thorpe) cf. Beow. 218' (St. Andrews University Library copy of Sweet, 163).<sup>1</sup> Line 218 of *Beowulf* describes the ship in which the Geats first sail to Denmark; *flota fami-heals, fugle gelicost* (*Beowulf*, 16). *Beowulf*'s ship is 'a foamy-necked floater, most like a bird', and it is easy to see how the St. Andrews glossator might consider this line to support a figurative reading of the *fugel* in *The Wanderer* as 'ship'. This anecdotal evidence offers some support for the possibility that this interpretation of *fugel* may have had currency in university departments where Anglo-Saxon poetry was taught. We might tentatively conclude that Pound could be courting such a metamorphosis of bird to vessel in his poem, for

<sup>1</sup> Presented to St. Andrews University Library in 1956, after having been used by at least one previous reader. Printed in 1894.

following the *fuigel* in 'Canto 27' are Royal Navy cruisers, which are being readied to bear men away to their deaths; 'Observed that the paint was/Three quarters of an inch thick and concluded./As they were being rammed through, the age of that/Cruiser.' (*The Cantos*, 27/129 - see also Terrell, 110).

Pound had found a use for the seabirds of *The Wanderer* much earlier in his poem. In 'Canto 2' they lie behind the gulls who 'broad out their wings' and the snipe who 'spread wet wings to the sun-film' (*The Cantos*, 2/6-7). This use of the Anglo-Saxon motif is not noted by Fred Robinson in his article 'The Might of the North', but Pound drew attention to it in a letter of March 1992, to Ford Madox Ford, who had questioned the zoological accuracy of 'snipe':

Now Snipe?, aren't they the damn longlegged barstards that scurry along the sand in N.J.? I can hardly go in for reed-birds or more scientifically differentiated orniths. I wuz told as a kid that the damn things were snipe. BATHIAN BRIMFUGL BRAEDAN FAETHRA, is the general text. (*L/FMF*, 65)

The 'general text' which Pound is (presumably) quoting from memory is actually line 47 of *The Wanderer*, and runs *bapian brimfluglas, brædan feþra*, or 'seabirds bathing, stretching out their feathers' (*The Exeter Book*, 135). In 'Canto 2' the motif is deployed as part of the seafaring texture which Pound creates through the fusion of Homeric Greek epic and Anglo-Saxon lyric; a stylistic run-over from 'Canto 1'. Homer may have an 'ear for the sea-surge' (*The Cantos*, 2/6), but when he sings its song in English, it is filtered through the medium of Anglo-Saxon poetry ('sea-surge' is the same word with which Pound had earlier translated *yða gewealc*, or 'tossing of the waves', from line 6 of *The Seafarer*: see Sweet's *Anglo-Saxon Reader*, 171 and Pound, *CEP*, 64).

However, the use to which Pound puts *The Wanderer* in the opening lines of 'Canto 27' demonstrates that it is not merely in singing 'the sea-surge' that he finds Anglo-Saxon an expedient resource. Many of the poems in the traditional Anglo-Saxon canon have been described as elegies, in particular the ones which most attracted Pound: *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*. That Pound made use of the elegiac strain of Anglo-Saxon in *The Cantos* is not news. 'Lordly men are to earth o'ergiven', a self-quotation from Pound's version of *The Seafarer*, is how the poet pays his respects to those of his companions who had passed away by the time he was composing the first Pisan Canto (*The Cantos*, 74/446). What is not yet understood is both the extent to which Pound deploys this Saxon elegiac tone, and how early it can be found in his epic. The part played by *The Wanderer* in the opening of 'Canto 27' is one piece of evidence that argues for a reappraisal, but it is by no means a solitary one. Elpenor is the first companion to be lost in *The Cantos*; the saxonised 'Canto 1' is in part his elegy.

‘Canto 28’, dealing mainly with the casual and the contemporary, also contains this elegiac, saxonist element. As it draws to a close the poem introduces a collection of trans-Atlantic pilots;

And lest it pass with the day’s news  
 Thrown out with the daily paper,  
 Neither official pet  
 Nor Levine with the lucky button  
 Went on into darkness,  
 Saw naught above but close dark,  
 Weight of ice on the fuselage  
 Borne into the tempest, black cloud wrapping their wings,  
 The night hollow beneath them  
 And fell with dawn into ocean  
 But for the night saw neither sky nor ocean  
 And found ship... why?... how?... by the Azores.  
 And she was a bathing beauty, Miss Arkansas or Texas  
 And the man (of course) quasi anonymous  
 Neither a placard for non-smokers or non-alcohol  
 Nor for the code of Peoria;  
 Or one-eyed Hinchcliffe and Elsie  
 Blackeyed bitch that married dear Dennis,  
 That flew out into nothingness  
 And her father was the son of one too  
 That got the annulment.

*(The Cantos, 28/139-40)*

‘Miss Arkansas or Texas’ is identified by Terrell as probably being Ruth Elder from Alabama, who, in 1927, attempted to fly from New York to Europe. She and her co-pilot were forced off-course and had to land in the sea near the Azores, having weathered a storm for two days. Pound briefly juxtaposes her with Levine and ‘the official pet’ (Terrell suggests Lindbergh): two successful ocean-crossing aviators. Yet it is the lost craft, beset by epic difficulties that particularly interests Pound and dominates this twenty-one line passage, before giving way to two even more ill-fated travellers. Walter Hinchcliffe and Elsie Mackay took off for America from an airport in Lincolnshire on March the 13<sup>th</sup> 1928: neither was heard of again.

That these ocean-crossing travellers are twentieth-century Ulyssean voyagers is apparent. They are types of Odysseus, or of his companions: repeats from ‘Canto 1’ where this part of the poem’s palette was established. Certainly their endeavours might seem more trivial than those of Homeric legend: these are degenerate, contemporary

Odysseuses. Yet Pound is keen that they are remembered, ‘lest it pass with the day’s news.’ There are heroic trials in modern life which rise above the level of the voyeuristic journalism which records and debases them. Pound notes how the press are entirely uninterested in Elder’s male co-pilot and, by portraying her as a ‘bathing beauty’, he suggests that the journalistic interest barely rises above the desire to titillate (also making her a degenerate Venus of course, born[e] of the waves). Hinchcliffe and Mackay, unlike Lindbergh, don’t even merit a placard. By placing them in his poem, Pound hopes to memorialise their heroic tribulations and save them from the trivia of the twentieth-century press.

Not only are these aviators variations on the Homeric archetype; they are also wanderers; seafarers whose loss is mourned. As the opening of the previous canto reflects on the literal or metaphorical disappearance of individuals, so the close of this canto remembers those who are lost at sea, either temporarily or permanently. There is an ambiguity about Elder’s vehicle: is a plane which lands on the water a craft of the air, or craft of the sea, or both (we don’t know if it actually was a seaplane, or whether necessity forced it to become one)? The ‘sea-fowl’ of Pound’s ‘Seafarer’ are recalled, as are the Saxon snipe of ‘Canto 2’, who shift form as they shift medium. So too the attentive reader might briefly reconsider the previous canto’s *fugel*: is it a bird, or a ship? Or perhaps now a fuselage?

As the passage gains momentum Pound gradually builds the Anglo-Saxon musculature of his ‘Canto 1’ idiom into the verse. An archaism in the first line, ‘lest’ is the first hint of this, although archaism is used with such restraint in this passage that it is hardly a feature at all; perhaps merely a clue to help our ear tune in to what follows. The fourth line introduces a phrase constructed with ‘nor’; part of the rhetoric of Anglo-Saxon poetry and a syntactical device that also found its way into the saxonist first canto (highlighted there by repetition; ‘Nor with stars stretched, nor looking back from heaven’ - *The Cantos*, 1/3). Admittedly this is a less noticeable feature, being set-up more idiomatically by the ‘neither’ of the third line, but by now we are being propelled forward as the saxonisms gain weight. The next two lines open emphatically with the finite verb in first position. This feature, enabled by the postponement of the verbs after the twin subjects of this negative sentence (Levine and the official pet), is also reminiscent of ‘Canto 1’ (‘Set keel to breakers’, ‘bore sheep aboard her’) and employs a kind of appositional expansion on the subjects in the manner of the Anglo-Saxon *scop* (‘poet’ or ‘maker’). Alliteration builds across lines rather than within them, as ‘cloud’ echoes ‘close’, ‘wings’ picks up both ‘weight’ and ‘went’, and then, in the longest line, beats start to alliterate more densely; ‘black’ follows ‘borne’, ‘night’ is followed by ‘-neath’, which together reiterate ‘naught’ (another archaism, used in Pound’s ‘Seafarer’), just as ‘dawn’ recalls ‘dark’. Using alliteration more flexibly, to strengthen the sinews of the verse, to make the language denser, rather than as an organising metrical principle

is again in accord with the style Pound refines in ‘Canto 1’. The divorce of verbs from their subject now becomes a more noticeable feature as ‘Borne’ (which is another ‘Canto 1’ word) and ‘fell’ are so far from the head of the sentence that we might have forgotten that these problems are what did *not* befall the lucky Levine and Lindbergh. Ice grips these seafarers, just as it did the seafarer and the wings of the seabirds in Pound’s translation. Even some of the articles are characteristically omitted as the verse becomes more terse (for example ‘weight of ice’ and ‘fell with dawn into ocean’).

This saxonised style is used in direct contrast to the journalese which would otherwise provide the only record of these events. Pound appeals to a medieval idiom, made (he believed) before language had been corrupted by the decadence of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As gradually as it was worked up, the style dissolves. It leaves us by way of another neither/nor parallel construction and some more half-hearted alliteration (‘bathing beauty’, ‘blackeyed bitch’, ‘dear Dennis’) and then, like the lost voyagers, it is gone. Pound has woven a brief, saxon-like elegiac passage to memorialise the trials of these latter-day seafarers. Some a bird bore off.

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