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‘HARDY’S TWO VOICES: A METRICAL READING of “THE OXEN”

JOHN HUGHES

The companion essay on “The Oxen” in the previous issue had sought to respect the poem’s important critical, biographical and literary historical contexts while bringing out how much more there might be to say about a poem whose internal dynamics of skepticism and vision often inspire commentary rather than exploration or critical reading. This essay offers a close study of the workings of metre in “The Oxen” to argue that the poem’s meaning and effects are shaped extensively by an internal drama of voice and intonation.

Keywords: Thomas Hardy, metre, voice, “The Oxen”, religion, childhood

John Hughes

Here is the metrical transcription of the poem, employing Derek Attridge and Thomas Carper’s method:¹

‘The Oxen’
B o B o B -o- B
Christmas Eve, and twelve of the clock.
B -o- B -o- B [B]
“Now they are all on their knees,”
o B o B -o- B -o- B
An elder said as we sat in a flock
-o- B -o- B o B [B]
By the embers in hearthside ease.

¹ Thomas Carper and Derek Attridge, *Meter and Meaning* (London: Routledge, 2003): 147.

- B** beat [emphasized syllable]
- b** beat [unemphasized syllable]
- [B]** virtual beat [no syllable]
(perceived at the end of trimeter lines, as in ballad stanzas)
- o** offbeat [unemphasized syllable]
- O** offbeat [emphasized syllable]
- o-** double offbeat [two unemphasized syllables]
(one – very rarely, both – of the two syllables that comprise an off-beat may be emphasized
(=): =o-, -o=, =o=)
- [o]** virtual offbeat [no syllable, perceived offbeat]
- ô** implied offbeat [no syllable, necessary rhythmical pause]
- ~o~** triple offbeat [three unemphasized syllables]
(exceedingly rare in stricter metrical styles)

o B -o- B O B o b
We pictured the meek mild creatures where

o B -o- B o B [B]
They dwelt in their strawy pen,

o B -o- B o B -o- B
Nor did it occur to one of us there

o B - B o B [B]
To doubt they were kneeling then.

o B o B o B o B
So fair a fancy few would weave

o B o B o B [B]
In these years! Yet, I feel,

o B o B o B o B
If someone said on Christmas Eve,

B [ô] B o B o B
“Come; see the oxen kneel,

-o- B o B -o- B o B
“In the lonely barton by yonder coomb

o B o B o B [B]
Our childhood used to know,”

-o- B o O -o- B
I should go with him in the gloom,

B -o- B o b [B]
Hoping it might be so. ²

Metrically, the first significant feature to notice is that the first stanza divides into two distinct rhythmical units: respectively, the first two lines, and then the last two:

B o B o B -o- B
Christmas Eve, and twelve of the clock.
B -o- B -o- B [B]
“Now they are all on their knees,”

Taking this first pair, the dominant metrical figure is the use of B o B and B -o- B motifs that break the lines into separable metrical units, and underscore the dramatic insistence on a single moment of time through emphatic initial beats (*‘Christmas Eve; twelve of the clock; Now they are all’*). This poem about the past thus begins by foregrounding this dominant sense of the former present as an arresting here and now, as the *clock* ticked (or chimed) *twelve, now*, on *Christmas Eve*. A moment whose announcement summoned the children is thus replicated in the poem’s claim upon the reader, as metre and punctuation fold the lines internally into singular moments, phrases. But there is a temporal

² Thomas Hardy, *The Complete Poems*, ed. James Gibson (London: Macmillan, 1976) 468.

complexity in this that goes beyond this paralleling of the poem's scenario and its enactments. After all, this midnight moment was not merely announced by the elders, but was itself imbued with a sense of annunciation and promise, its pointed significance being above all that it was perforated by transcendence. The children's moving attitude of spontaneous receptivity accordingly signals not merely obedience, but a spiritual openness to a moment that they unquestioningly took as bearing within itself the insistent tension, the transfiguring intimation, of what is outside self and time. And, as the arresting metre produces an expectant readiness in the reader who is transported back to the unguarded attitudes of childhood, so too the children experienced themselves as internally divided between the quotidian self, on Christmas Eve with their friends, and the sudden incarnation of this self of faith and vision. It is this dynamic division between the everyday and an acceptance of transcendence, then, that is central to this stanza and the two pairs of lines. In the first pair the metre works to re-present the children's religious attitude as compliant subjection, and to incorporate the reader within this childhood responsiveness to the elder's words, and the promise of spiritual transport.

But how do the second pair of lines work here?

o B o B -o- B -o- B

An elder said as we sat in a flock

-o- B -o- B o B [B]

By the embers in hearthside ease.

The first thing to note is that the rhythmic mode contrasts sharply, but while extending the main effect, which is to solicit our intimacy with the motions of the children's inner world, as they turn to that imagining of the oxen that will be explicitly described in the next stanza. Very passingly, there is here for the first time a definite, regular iambic pattern ('An *elder said*'), as if the language were itself settling down - like the children now transfixed by the words of the elder and the sense of occasion. But this proves to be just a momentary transition, as the rhythm becomes immediately given over to a dominant anapaestic (double off beat/beat: -o- B) motif, which importantly imparts a prevailing effect of fluency and release to these lines ('on their *knees*; as we *sat*; in a *flock*; By the *em*; -bers in *hearth*...'). This lilting rhythmic figure I take as investing the lines with the quality of the children's own eager mobility of mind that will explicitly surface in the word 'ease' and the children's visionary transports in the following stanza. No sooner are they seated, it seems, than their hearts and minds are open, pliable, ready, and in motion. Accordingly, this anapaestic motif is an important metrical signature of the youthful mind and a vehicle for what the first half of the poem conveys, and revives, within the reader: the children's own autonomic and easeful responsiveness, that youthful plasticity of mind that emerges as being no less spiritual than physical and affective.

Taken together, then, the two motifs in the first stanza begin to underscore how transformative the experience is for the children, as well as how dependent it is on the secure environment and the promptings of the elder. In the next stanza, the children will come to envision the oxen kneeling miraculously, but here and there the metre affects us in a comparable way, incorporating us within the past time, and contributing powerfully to the poem's powerful chain of imaginative and spiritual

transmission. In and through this, however modestly, the poetry thereby unquestionably takes on a certain redemptive and visionary power of its own, operating outside of chronology and the self. And metre, one can suggest, is the expressive gateway here through which we imaginatively inhabit the minds and experience of the children who themselves – sitting in a flock – so easily envision the cattle kneeling, those cattle who are themselves in turn imagined as envisioning the redeemer... The important crux here is that the metre ensures that we do not imagine the children as it were from the outside – as an ensemble who are depicted by the verse. Rather the metre creates an effect of commutability that is central, and that surfaces in the next stanza to lead us into their imaginings of the oxen. A further, telling index of these effects of commutability and transmission is that they even go beyond this intimacy with the children, since we privately as readers surely come to see in our mind’s eye here something nowhere described in the poem. That is to say, we see what they imagine *the oxen* themselves imagining: a nativity scene, with a stable, some animals, some straw, and an infant...

So in the stanzas that follow the first, it is not just the poet who is transported, but also the reader, the child, and even the cattle themselves, and all together. But how is this further developed through metre in the next stanza?

o B -o- B O B o b
 We pictured the meek mild creatures where
 o B -o- B o B [B]
 They dwelt in their strawy pen,
 o B -o- B o B -o- B
 Nor did it occur to one of us there
 o B -o- B o B [B]
 To doubt they were kneeling then.

To begin with, one can note that this stanza continues to use the anapaestic motif to evoke the children’s flexible fluency of vision. However, there is an important and twofold shift. Where the children’s quality of mind had been evoked implicitly through the anapaestic, now it is the explicit theme or topic of the stanza. In the first two lines it is *described*, and in the second two lines it is *reflected upon*, as the adult speaker marvels at the children’s facility and imperviousness to doubt. The children’s engrossment in the picture of the oxen, thus becomes remembered, and then ruminated over, by the belated poet. Metrically, the main principle employed to convey this sense of the children’s minds as incorporated within the concentric layers of the adult’s reminiscence and musing is introduced in its opening words. There Hardy uses a combination of iambic and anapaestic to make a compound motif (o B –o- B) that functions throughout the stanza, to create a marked and recurrent effect of passage and tension as the speaker’s mind opens and closes, between merging with the children’s then returning to itself. Definitely, the anapaestic still imparts an effect of expressive expansion here, suitable to the set-piece description of the children’s reveries of the cattle in their pen. But it does so more passingly, as an intermittent effect, after the iambic (in square brackets following) which functions to constrain it within these orbits of adult introspection. ([We *pic*tured the *meek*; [They *dwelt*] in their *strawy*... ‘Nor *did*] it occur; [to *one*] of us *there*; [To *doubt*] they were *kneeling*’). Accordingly, this motif expressively introduces into the poem the main thematic division of the poem,

between the speaker's enthusiasm for the imaginative flights of childhood, and the returning influence of adult doubt.³

Nonetheless, it is within this stanza also that our inwardness with the children is most beautifully and deeply achieved through the two phrases on consecutive lines that unfold the singular moments of their picturing of the 'meek mild creatures' in their 'strawy pen'. In the first, the emphasised off-beat on the alliterative adjective 'mild' places the syllable half way between stressed and unstressed. There is a perfect appropriateness to this, since in itself meekness is indeterminate between being a quality that the child responds to (in imagining it in the cattle) and a quality that he reveals (since it must be incarnated within himself if he is to recognise and respond to it). Such effective indetermination between reception and generosity at this moment surprises the adult reader with the child's forgotten sense of meekness, abetted of course by the knowing echo of Charles Wesley's lines 'Gentle Jesus, meek and mild/Look upon a little child',⁴ a hymn where Christ himself is described as 'gentle lamb'. In the second phrase, 'strawy pen', the writing again marvellously eclipses the adult world to similar effect. Metrically, the line just slightly snags on the second syllable of 'strawy', which catches the halting exactitudes of a child's sensibility and voice, as it formulates, like a poet, its own original phrases. Further, this neologism implies the child's own empathetic transport into the world of the cattle, and his moving sense that the pen is a home, the place where they 'dwelt'. The child's receptive and meek attention to the cattle thus becomes transmitted to the adult who must receive it in kind. In such ways, the reader is led like Hardy's speaker at this moment, to see again through a child's eyes, bringing to mind the Christian injunction to become as a little child, or Wesley's final hope that the child's reception of Christian meekness might led him to reveal to the whole world the 'Holy Child, in me'.⁵

These poetic enactments then indubitably involve us – physically, affectively and imaginatively - within these expansive moments of childhood vision at odds with the adult vigilance of an interiority fenced round by scepticism and doubt. The child's mind reveals itself as what the adult has forgotten. But there is much more to this than sentimental wonder or nostalgic regret, since the child's relation to the world can even be taken as a form of philosophical critique that exposes the inherent limitations of adult attitudes towards knowledge and belief. This might seem to be stretching things a little to say the least, but I think it is an idea worth pursuing, if only because it allows one to emphasise what seem the proper and innately philosophical dimensions of Hardy's poetry. On this description, the child's mind expresses essential and fundamental attitudes - receptivity, response, empathy, and imagination – that are not only opposed to sceptical subjectivity, but are more

³ Deborah Collins emphasizes that Hardy's ambivalence in the poem is 'emotional rather than intellectual', and that the oxen tale is merely an 'enchanted' 'Christmas Eve story... similar to so many other traditions which remains lovely, useless relics, powerless against modern scepticism'. Hardy in reality, she says, would not have been genuinely tempted to carry out the 'oxen test'. Deborah Collins, *Thomas Hardy and His God: A Liturgy of Unbelief* (London: Macmillan, 1990), 20.

⁴ A similar indetermination is also evident in the metrical promotion of the word 'where' at the end of the line to make an unemphasized beat.

⁵ <http://www.hymntime.com/tch/htm/g/e/n/gentleje.htm>

fundamental than it. Which is itself another way of saying, as philosophers variously have done, that our deepest relation to the world is not one of knowledge or belief, but could be described as something like a form of acknowledgement (Cavell), or of dwelling (Heidegger) or of reception (Emerson). If I hazard prestigious philosophical names then it is to provide a kind of corrective, in the belief that too often the philosophical dimensions of Hardy's writing, evident in the rigours of its intimate and effective ironic discordances, are ignored, or are misconstrued in terms of the larger, tendentious pronouncements, which in turn are dismissed as the over-reaching of an autodidact... Here I would add one final philosophical gloss, perhaps the most compelling in terms of the poem's own meaning. The childhood responses unfolded in 'The Oxen' can be said to reveal what Wittgenstein would describe as an essential attunement - towards community, relationship and shared meaning - that is based in spontaneous kinds of disposition characteristic of human beings, and that reveals kinds of judgement that go beyond and before the cognitive distinctions of what is natural or conventional. Or you might say such expressions of mind are both natural and conventional at once, that our capacity for language is naturally social in essence and in its conditions, and naturally dependent on our making the same kinds of automatic response when an older person teaches us something.⁶ It is this that the adult sceptic has forgotten, in his search to ground our conception of reality in what is a matter of knowledge, doubt, and belief.

In the third stanza, the shift back to such a sceptical adult self occurs, as the speaker regrets the passing of such stories as the elders shared with the children:

o B o B o B o B
 So fair a fancy few would weave
 o B o B o B [B]
 In these years! Yet, I feel,
 o B o B o B o B
 If someone said on Christmas Eve,
 B [ô] B o B o B
 "Come; see the oxen kneel,

Outwardly, the speaker sounds a meditative note, reflecting in sober iambic metre on the disharmony of the unimaginative present, his words culminating in a rueful exclamation point ('So *fair* a *fancy few* would *weave* / In *these* years!). Nonetheless, the exquisite alliterative effects and musical echoes of the opening line 'so *fair* a *fancy few* would *weave*' speak of a mind that still turns its own phrases in wistful emulation of the intricate weavings of the past. Metrically too these alliterative phrases importantly suggest a cross-rhythm, since they have a centripetal tendency that pulls against the otherwise customary, unrelieved iambic metre, and that echoes the BoB motif earlier associated with the elders and the children ('*fair* a *fancy/ few* would *weave*'). The possible syncopation of this recalled BoB motif recurs again in the opening of the second sentence ('*Yet I feel*'). In this respect, the seemingly

⁶ This might be said to be evident in the poem in the way it draws us into how the children's thoughts shape themselves through empathic and communal projections in which neither self nor other are seen as dominant, and through which social relationships are naturally discovered and instantiated.

regular metrical substance of the language is subject to rhythmical echoes from the past expressive of a speaker who ruefully feels and contemplates his displacement from the remembered time when there was a collective readiness for a transfigured world. And with the word 'Yet', his abiding longing for this and his former capacity for imagination rise irresistibly to the surface of consciousness, though seemingly transposed into mere fantasy. Now the poem turns to the final scenario of the poem, with the reverie of the anonymous figure who comes to invite him to see the kneeling oxen. Suitably, in the final line the dominance of the outwardly prevalent iambic pattern in the stanza is definitively disrupted. The implied off beat between the two consecutive beats on 'Come' and 'See' gives a powerful sense of pause, as the man addresses the poet and solicits his response:

B [ô] B o B o B
 "Come; see the oxen kneel,

This imagined meeting ironically replicates the former scene between children and elder, as the man instructively addresses the speaker and seeks to solicit his response.

Once again then, the metre expressively implies what the poem then comes to make explicit: the speaker's abiding desire for transcendence. The final stanza goes on movingly and explicitly to acknowledge this fact: though now old, he cannot but admit that he would follow this anonymous figure, hoping against hope in the gloom of the present, to replicate the child's experience of a scene of wonder and instruction.⁷ In the last stanza, the earlier scene with the elder is partially reprised, as the unknown and now merely imagined person invites the speaker to revisit the now 'lonely' farmyard of his childhood:

-o- B o B -o- B o B
 "In the lonely barton by yonder coomb
 o B o B o B [B]
 Our childhood used to know,"
 -o- B o O -o- B
 I should go with him in the gloom,
 B -o- B o b [B]
 Hoping it might be so.

Metrically, this stanza reprises the interweaving of iambic and anapaestic, though now as initially

⁷ As suggested earlier too, the form of transcendence internal to poetry itself is undoubtedly renewed through the poem. Poetry affirms itself through its own enactments as the activity and locus of the mind's capacity for spiritual recreation and vision, the vehicle for human dedication towards a transformed world, and the testament to our need to overcome the privative work of loss and conflict. As an aspect of this, the intonational features of the verse in this poem indubitably become the means through which the reader hear the voices of speaker, elder and the anonymous figure sounding within himself/herself, and finds thereby the essentially projective capacities of poetry reawakened.

transposed, so that in the first three lines a dominant anapaestic-iambic (–o-BoB) motif reverses and replaces the earlier iambic-anapaestic one (oB-o-B). That earlier motif had given the anapaestic the effect of an interruption, identified with the invigorated sense of the child’s imagination, expanding beyond the present and infusing the adult’s memory. But in this final stanza, the reversal means that the anapaestic gives way to the iambic in a way that communicates a regretful and weary tone of age and loss. Where the earlier effect had been of a certain influx of insurgent and unself-conscious childish inspiration, the later one is emphatically of belatedness. He is an aged speaker now consciously taking absent vision - the pursuit and lack of it - as his conscious theme, and inevitably constrained by his lowering awareness of the present time as a gloomy dead-end. So, the opening line is composed of two successive occasions of this –o-B o B motif. The combined effect is subtly, but unmistakably, to underscore this overall sense of the poet holding here, now consciously, to the vanishing possibilities for vision in a situation compassed round by age, loneliness, and doubt. Metrically, this deflation is then further accentuated by the flat iambic regularity of the second line: ‘Our *childhood used to know*’.

The closing lines of the poem are the culmination of the speaker’s abiding position on the threshold of belief, unable either to abandon or endorse the place of faith. So he states that he would ‘go with’ the imagined man ‘in the gloom’. The latter appears as an uncertain and mysterious figure, possibly reminiscent as was suggested earlier, of some visitor in a Christian story who might beckon another to ‘come’ and follow: perhaps concealing beneath an unprepossessing exterior the miraculous identity of an angel. Appropriately enough, the metre contributes to this final sense of mystery and indeterminacy in the penultimate line. Earlier in the poem we have noted the eloquent use of the emphasised off-beat - not quite a beat, not quite an off-beat - on the word ‘mild’ that gave an immersive and poignant sense of the child’s intuition of the oxen as gentle creatures. In this line, the emphasised off-beat is used again to important and similar effect on the equally significant word, ‘him’:

-o- B o O -o- B
I should go with him in the gloom,

Metrically, this emphasised off-beat importantly disrupts the expected return of the stanza’s anapaestic-iambic motif.⁸ Further, as an understated half-stress, it creates a perfectly appropriate sense of hopeful uncertainty. My preference for the emphasized off-beat means that I read the line as slowing here, as if the speaker were imagining his progress as an series of blind steps into the uncertain and contingent, his attitude still one of receptivity... This accords with the reading of the closing line where the speaker gives final expression to his muted attitude - of a readiness for belief, though without the content. This is voiced memorably as what can be taken as the explicit summation of the continuing capacity for hope, even against doubt and knowledge, that has run through the poem:

B -o- B o b [B]
Hoping it might be so.

⁸ Moreover, it might even suggest contrarily the return in this line of the earlier iambic-anapaestic motif, were we to promote the word ‘him’ to hear it with slightly more emphasis as a beat.

The metre conveys this muted affirmation through the faintest uplift of the double off-beat which though bounded by preceding beat, also is followed by a beat and then an iambic construction (ob) , so that one might hear within this final line the echo of the earlier anapaestic-iambic motif (as in bold here: Hop-**ing it might be so**'), before the final full stop. In this way the poem draws together in this final conspiracy of metre and meaning, the poem's double, contrary sense of poetry: that its enactments and imaginative flights retain in a reduced form the redemptive promise of religion, that poetry occupies a location evacuated by belief, yet still stoical, and open towards hope, beyond scepticism.