

Some Riddles in Old English Alliterative Verse

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There forms around the human mind and senses a rust, a patina, a moondust layer of indifference, a despair at the ordinariness of the world we live in. This has to be brushed off, chipped away, the live skin of present sensation and thought left open to the past and future, old songs must be heard and new ones sung or the dance will die and the spirits will be no longer honoured. To change the metaphor, it has seemed to me that the Old English Riddles—those in the Exeter Book, for instance—are like glass-bottomed boats that let us see, drifting just below us in the depths of everyday things and common beings, creatures incredible yet real, in colours and light unbelievable yet visible, so that we marvel once more at how the human creature lives in this shallow ocean of air, just above the deep ocean in which our ancestors once breathed, “the mind, that ocean where each kind / doth straight its own resemblance find,” as the poet Marvell said. I have tried to revive the riddle-form by looking at the mysterious inwardness of ordinary things here and now, in “our own world,” that is, here in North America in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, as our computers count them at the present time. In this riddle-form, some ordinary created beings speak to reveal some of their mysteries, let some of their powers up from their depths into “the boat we all are in.” Here is what a “house” says:

1. The Poet's Cottage

At your finger's touch my turquoise flower
of fossil sunlight flashes, you call
from mountain springs bright spurts of water
that dancing boil on its blue petals
crushed seeds, their life's loss repaid
with offered words. Watchful electrons
in copper wall-snakes await your cue

to dance like Talking God down from heaven
 and bring Mozart's melodies back,
 pixel this world's woe and wonder, but
 through wind's eye you see the sun rising
 as creatures of earth from heaven's darkness
 open iris-nets to the harsh light
 of human mysteries, your *here* and *now*,
 needle points where numberless
 angels are dancing, *always* and *everywhere*.

When I read poems in Tucson and stayed in the Poet's Cottage, I waked before daylight, had some oatmeal and coffee, and listened to radio and television. It occurred to me that a House had never been given its chance to speak its being, so I tried to let it do that—speak to me, and the poem's readers. The natural gas stove had automatic burners, so a finger's touch waked hard gemlike flames, in the shape of a turquoise flower—form following function, fire opening like a cactus-flower for the same reasons, to perpetuate the species (the flower is a sex-organ and must be beautiful and attractive to pollinators; the flame is a food-organ and must do its job efficiently so people will keep such stoves “alive”). And the natural gas, brought up from deep within the earth, is methane from the old marshes and jungles and seas, the result of our star's immense energy having been absorbed into “life-beings” and transformed into carbohydrates and then into hydrocarbon “fossils”—thus being a kind of “fossil sunlight.” So we “turn on the stove,” and then we “turn on the faucet” from which water flows, water that in Tucson comes down from the great reservoirs fed by mountain springs. And into the pot of water we pour the dried and crushed seeds of oats, set the pot over the turquoise flower that makes the water dance and boils the oatmeal. We offer words of thanks for this food, for the loss of life in these seeds that becomes our continuing in life as we eat them.

And then we “turn on” the radio and television sets: the electricity was “waiting” in the walls for us, its copper wires hidden like snakes in the walls, and given their cue these electrons come dancing out like Talking God (in the *Diné Bahané*), and what they “bring down from heaven” (through their antennae) might be the music of Mozart, could be some of our songs for that matter. The pixels on the tv screen show us the “news” (“this world's woe and wonder”), but then as daylight grows outside the house, a look through the window (the Old English noun-compound from which *window* comes literally means “wind-eye”) shows that the sun is rising, and the birds

and other “creatures of earth” are moving out of night (“heaven’s darkness”) and opening their eyes (“iris-nets” to “catch” the sights—Iris was a Greek morning goddess, and is a flower and a rainbow and a part of the human eye, its “colour” part; and our word *retina* means “little net”). To these creatures, this light reveals mysterious humans, and the very great mysteries which we dismiss by calling them *here* and *now*—that is, Present Space and Present Time. The finale of the riddle is to remind us that these mysteries are small and sharp-pointed as that needle-point upon which the medieval scholars used to try and count the angels dancing, and in this sense a *here* is an *everywhere*, a *now* is an *always*.

2. Refrigerator

As winter snows come sifting down,
 White-cold around this kitchen’s summer,
 My heart’s blue flame freezes out famine,
 Swallows Provence and provides Alaska’s
 Food-filled winter in my warm white body
 Whose freon blood around belly’s ice
 Pulsing, expanding, purring breathes out
 Warmth for cats curled at my feet
 To lick their furred forepaws clean,
 Pink-tonguing cream from tipped whiskers—
 Between two winters warm as toast.

The paradox central to this riddle is that a refrigerator needs a source of intense heat in order to freeze things. It is a “white body” within which (if it is an old-fashioned gas refrigerator like the one we had in Oklahoma when I was growing up) a flame heats the gas (it used to be freon, I’m not sure what it now may be) whose expansion and contraction cycles drive the cooling of what is within the refrigerator, while the heat being taken out of the interior is “breathed out” by a gentle fan down at the foot of the refrigerator—marking a warm place where sometimes our cats, in the wintertime, may curl up. I hope the rest of this riddle is clear enough.

3. Detergent

Poured in a sink, my sapphire soul
 Cherubic rises in rainbow bubbles,
 I clean a clouded cut-glass until

It shatters the sun to shards of rainbow
 As when blue-gold dawn brings day from night,
 Bright colour washes your world-stains clean.

There is a rather neat theological dimension to *detergent*. Or, perhaps, the precise word would be *liturgical* dimension?

4. *The Swan's Song*

Garbed in silence I go on earth,
 Dwell among men or move on the waters,
 Yet far over halls of heroes in time
 My robes and the high air may raise
 And bear me up in heaven's power
 Over all nations. My ornaments then
 Are singing glories and I go in song
 Bright as a star unstaying above
 The world's wide waters, a wayfaring soul.

It would be a grave mistake to think one had “solved” the riddle of this poem by saying, “Swan!” The Old English poet surely meant us to do more than just listen to each clue as the poem unfolds, and gradually deduce who is speaking to us here. We certainly are meant to go through that process, to observe that this creature telling its life-story lives in silence among human beings or on the water; but then it takes to the air, rises far above human habitations and looks down from that height on those, even the most heroic of them, dwelling below; and when it moves at that height its ornaments (which the Old English original implies are the same as its “robes”) “sing” and “shine,” so that in flight it moves in glory that is beyond the mortal heroes on earth. And we are surely meant to see with astonishment in the poem's last few words that this earth-mute, heaven-musical traveler is a pilgrim soul. That is, everything in the poem comes together in those last few words, and we see this “swan” is an emblem of the immortal soul which in its flesh is relatively mute and slow and likely to be held of little account, but when it rises to its heavenly destination makes part of the angelic choir, going in glorious music toward the throne of God, its wayfaring at last reaching that place of power and beauty far beyond the palaces and thrones of human monarchs and heroes.

5. *What the Eagle Fan Says*

I strung dazzling thrones of thunder beings
 On a spiraling thread of spinning flight
 Beading dawn's blood and blue of noon
 To the gold and dark of day's leaving,
 Circling with Sun the soaring heaven
 Over turquoise eyes of Earth below,
 Her silver veins, her sable fur,
 Heard human relatives hunting below
 Calling me down, crying their need
 That I bring them closer to Wakonda's ways,
 And I turned from heaven to help them then.
 When the bullet came, it caught my heart,
 The hunter's hands gave earth its blood,
 Loosed our light beings, let us float
 Toward the sacred centre of song in the drum,
 But fixed us first firm in song-home
 that green light-dancers gave to men's knives,
 ash-heart in hiding where deer-heart had beat,
 and a one-eyed serpent with silver-straight head
 strung tiny rattles around white softness
 in beaded harmonies of blue and red—
 lightly I move now in a man's left hand,
 above dancing feet follow the sun
 around old songs soaring toward heaven
 on human breath, and I help them rise.

Here, the eagle describes how it circles heaven the way a bead-worker's needle circles as the beads are sewn around and around the handle of an eagle-feather fan, and also as the dancers, carrying such fans, circle around the drum. The colours of the beaded handle are the scarlet, gold, and midnight blue of the heavens at dawn, noon, and sunset, as the eagle circles ("piercing" white clouds—the thrones of thunder beings—as the bead-worker's needle pierces the white buckskin); and these are the colours of a Gourd Dancer's blanket, scarlet of dawn, blue of midnight. The feathers remain alive in the fans, whose motion sends up the dancers' and singers' prayers for life to continue and the journey to be a good one.

I have written, in *Winning the Dust Bowl*, about being given a voice by Coyote, and finding a place for the Muses to bring down music, and being given my Osage name. But—I have added—even with a voice, a song, and one kind of name, there was the matter of “placing” the voice—*locating a self*. Maybe a good piece to illustrate how this worked at times for me, in my mixed red-and-white heritage, is the piece using an Old English “riddle,” to let an American Indian “space ship”—alias birchbark canoe—tell how it gets around this world. I picked up the riddle form in Oxford, and years later when I used it to let a Birch Canoe tell its story, I came to understand that this was also my story: the bringing into being of a mixed self, afloat between cultures and times, between heaven and earth, between North America and Europe—another way of being “transported” into and through time.

6. *Birch Canoe*

Red men embraced my body's whiteness
 Cutting into me carved it free,
 Sewed it tight with sinews taken
 From lightfoot deer who leaped this stream—
 Now in my ghost-skin they glide over clouds
 At home in the fish's fallen heaven.

To compose a riddle, the *scop* or writer listens for how some ordinary thing might describe its extraordinary being. The riddle is what this creature tells us of itself, from which we are supposed to guess its name and nature. Old English riddles are spoken, for instance, by a hawk or a hunting-horn, a Bible or a bookworm, a swan or ship's anchor, an onion or a man's shirt, by a thunderstorm or by the Cross of Christ. In each of these the created being speaks through a wordsmith, telling how it came into being, what it does, sometimes how it interacts with human beings.

Readers of the extant Old English riddles are not given title-solutions, but are expected to figure out for themselves the “solution” to each poem, deducing from its internal clues who the speaker is. If the answers were always obvious there would be no fun, and to have some fun, to be part of a social game, is one reason riddles were composed and recited or copied and read. In one of these mystery-poems, its telltale footprints might lead back to very different doors or dens, and sometimes they would lead through red-light districts, so to speak—although in most of these, the naughtiness turns out to be only in the listener's or reader's mind.

One mysterious creature, for instance, tells us with deadpan double entendre how a lady will pat and knead it until it rises—and then it turns out the creature speaking is Bread Dough! I should mention, however, that our modern word *lady* derives from the Old English word *hlæf-diga*, “loaf-kneader,” and our word *lord* comes from *hlæf-weard*, “loaf-guardian,” so an Anglo-Saxon listener or reader must have been very used to the double entendres in the Bread Dough riddle.

I hasten to point out that my twentieth-century Birch Canoe carries nothing the least bit naughty. The canoe tells how those who created it did so by cutting the white bark off a birch tree, carving it into canoe shape, and sewing it together. Of course, I should have said they used tamarack roots for the sewing, but I figured *some* of the binding might have been with tendons or sinews, so I dragged those deer-ligaments in, just so as to link that featherlight canoe with those lightfoot deer. Getting the deer in gave the poem plot and narrative flow: the windfoot deer once leaped the stream where now the white birch canoe floats lightly with the men who made it. And once the canoe got itself created and set on the stream, it could show us how it moves between heaven and earth, as if in a heaven of reflected clouds, and quite literally on the water, fallen from heaven, which now is the fish’s home.

I hope the reader will see that these words create red men who take white bark and make it into a way of moving in this stream, whatever heaven or earth it may be; and that my being a mixed-blood Osage and white person is part of the double vision which the riddle allows. I have no idea whether some of the Old English riddlers inscribed “autobiographical” elements into their riddles, but I would not be surprised—if we ever recovered evidence on the biographies of the riddlers, including the dates and circumstances of their composing particular poems—to find that they did. It seems more likely, however, that what was inscribed had as much to do with the politics and social relations of the beer-hall or monastery as with the individual writer. Riddles were not “romantic” projections of a writer’s psyche so much as participation in the social dynamics of the writer’s time and place.

I think, as a mere amateur reader of Old English poetry, that by the tenth century, when the largest extant gathering of Old English riddles was copied into the manuscript known as the Exeter Book, “pagan” Germanic riddles were being transubstantiated, as it were, from bread-loaves into Eucharist-wafers. One such genetically altered piece, I believe, is the “Swan” riddle, which I have translated and discussed above in a way that makes it (or perhaps reveals it to be) a poem about the human soul’s being fashioned more for heavenly than for earthly heroics, and the

unspoken implication of such a reading is that the poem was composed by, and for, a religious community—perhaps those of Exeter Cathedral itself. But when I read it to an audience, I like to mention that the manuscript used to be left open for view at a page marked by circular beer-stains from a mug or tankard which had been set there. Possibly the monk, or whoever thus desecrated the book, was in one way or another made to pay for so doing.

Some Worldly Riddles: Trinity and Skunk

There are other ways of being transported; here is another riddle spoken by a creature who can do it—a wilder creature with three natures who tells a little of what she does, and inscribes bold-faced anagrams of her three names. Such clues to a riddle-being's name and nature were used by Old English poets like Cynewulf, who “signed” their poems not with boldface type, as here, but inserting here and there Germanic runes instead of Latin-alphabet characters—so that a reader who knew runes could put together those alien letters into anagrams of the speaking creatures's name, or perhaps that of the poet.

The other archaic feature I have used in this first piece is calling it a “trinity” riddle. Old Christian exegetes were fond of pointing to “natural signs” thought to illuminate for human observers the great mystery of the Triune Nature of God. William Langland, in his long allegorical poem *Piers Plowman*, used the example of fingers closed in a fist. I don't put this riddle forward as Trinitarian, but I hope it catches the numinous flowing, floating, or shimmering near us.

7. A Trinity-Riddle

I spread, descending, a samite of stars.
 White fingers bring me for breakfast Mont Blanc,
 And I develop on earth's negative
 The prints proving a presence absent.
 Rainbow-dancing, my restless soft-self
 Teaches the sun at his summer turn to
 Reprise in dawn-prisms the light-praise of plants,
 Or stars in winter the still song-homes
 With brittle jewels dropped bright from darkness,
 Or shifts my shape to a shimmering self-trap.
Now Speak, if you spy it, the *special* name

I bear in spring when I bare *taw*dry alleys
To wear till dawn night-diamonds, till dusk the jewel of time.

Riddles need not be all solemn and sacred. For a History of the English Language course I needed a short, easily-memorised example students could use to compose their own riddles. Once, in Oklahoma, my Uncle Bert shot a skunk that was killing our chickens, and after some delicate skinning operations and deep frying in bacon-fat, we had a delicious meal: fried skunk is less gamy than rabbit or squirrel, and tender as young chicken.

8. *De Gustibus*

To skin a skunk, skill is needed—
But even fried few will eat it.

The example worked—that is, the students turned out some pretty good short alliterative pieces.

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Note that some of these riddles have previously been published in Carter Revard, *Winning the Dust Bowl* (Univ. of Arizona Press, 2001), and others in *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* (1999), pp. 177-89.