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Rumination and Re-Creation:

Poetic Instruction in

The Order of the World[*]

Ruth Wehlau

The Old English poem *The Order of the World* contains another poem within itself, a poem that is offered to the reader with the specific purpose of providing a sample or model of good poetry.[1] Although this sample poem is to some extent based on Psalm 18, it is neither a translation nor a paraphrase of the psalm. Rather, it is a reconstruction of the psalm in an Old English idiom.

The internal poem in *The Order of the World* is largely based on verses 2–7 of Psalm 18, and is described as a *herespel* (37), a term that Neil D. Isaacs translates as "psalm."[2] This poem is introduced by a passage of thirty-seven lines of advice directed toward a man who is referred to only as a *fus hæle* ("eager man" 1), presumably an aspiring poet. The apprentice poet is advised to consider the mysteries of the Creation as an aid to acquiring wisdom, and the passage from Psalm 18 that the *herespel* reworks is a hymn of praise to the Creator. The *herespel* clearly draws a parallel between God's creation of the cosmos and human creative power as manifested in poetry, an element that is not in the original psalm.

The Order of the World is thus a poem about poetry, a kind of Old English poetic manual in brief. It is the only such manual we have in Old

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English, and for that reason it deserves our attention. Both the choice of subject matter of the *herespel* and the manner of its construction are significant as both form part of Old English poetic tradition. Equally interesting is the likelihood that this tradition is here seen interacting with ruminative or contemplative reading as a method of poetic composition.

Let us first examine the subject matter of the *herespel*. The Creation was not an easy subject; in fact, it was a difficult one worthy of testing the wisest minds, as is clear from the comments in the introduction to the *herespel*:

> Leorna þas lare. Ic þe lungre sceal
> meotudes mægensped maran gesecgan,
> þonne þu hygecræftig in hreþre mæge
> mode gegripan. (23–26a)[3]
>
> [Learn this teaching! I shall speak to you forthwith about the majesty of the creator, greater than you, mind-crafty, can grasp in your heart with your thought.]

The word *hreþer* here may refer to the chest or heart as the locus of speech as described by Eric Jager (845–59). The difficulty of the subject would then lie in the inability of the poet to possess mentally the materials needed for poetic composition. Certainly, the selection of a psalm praising the Creator as a basis for the *herespel* is therefore a considered decision, a proof of the poet's ability to tackle a difficult subject. Furthermore, the subject of praise for the Creator is likely to be based on a long-standing tradition. Evidence for such a tradition resides in three other Old English poems that can also be designated as sample poems, poems that either function as models or offer advice on writing poetry. These are *Cædmon's Hymn*, *Beowulf*, and *Maxims I*.

The importance of *Cædmon's Hymn* to the Old English poetic tradition is well known. As told by Bede, Cædmon's skill is a divine gift, and thus beyond imitation, since his instruction in poetic composition came directly from God.[4] And it is not only Cædmon's poetic gift that is divinely given, but also the subject matter of the hymn. When Cædmon is told to sing by the voice in the stable, he asks "What must I sing?" The voice responds, "Sing about the beginning of created things" ("'Quid' inquit 'debeo cantare?' Et ille 'Canta' inquit 'principium creaturarum,'" 416–17). The subject of the Creation is thus an essential part of the divine inspiration and therefore of the status given to the poem by Bede. Although Bede appears to treat Cædmon as founder of a tradition of composing Christian poetry in Old English verse, it is also possible that there existed a native tradition of

praising the Creator, but that this tradition had never been officially recognized by the church.[5] Bede's placing of Cædmon at the beginning of the Old English poetic tradition would then be a formal Christian appropriation of a long-standing Anglo-Saxon tradition. In either case the Creation as a topic is significant since the poem's status has been authorized by Bede's story.[6] Placed at the beginning of the canon, the hymn is both a poetic beginning and a poem about beginnings.

The same linkage between the Creation and poetic beginnings occurs in the *Beowulf* poet's narration of the scop's first recitation within the walls of Heorot.[7] The scop's song, like *Cædmon's Hymn*, suggests that praise of the Creator was seen as a native tradition. *Beowulf* contains a good number of references to God, but it would be remarkable for the narrator to present us with the scop's song if it were meant to be understood as a Christian hymn of praise within a pagan hall. Instead, it is likely that the *Beowulf* poet accepted the tradition of praising the Creator as a long-standing one, and made use of it by paralleling the scop's description of the construction of the cosmos with the construction of Heorot.[8] As in *The Order of the World*, human building is seen as imitative of divine creation, and, like *Cædmon's Hymn*, the position of primacy is significant; this is the first song that we hear about in *Beowulf*, the song that provokes Grendel's attack. Its construction is parallel to God's since it too creates, describing through its very existence the boundaries of Heorot and of the whole community of humankind, a community that excludes Grendel. As "firsts," both the scop's song and *Cædmon's Hymn* operate as models, examples that serve to define. *Cædmon's Hymn* becomes a poetic icon; a text with a special relationship to the divine, it defines the religious tradition in Old English poetry. The scop's song, too, begins at the beginning, defining the boundaries of the community.

The emphasis on beginnings is made even more explicit in *Maxims I*, a poem that, like *The Order of the World*, offers advice to poets in the context of dialogue.[9] After a short introduction, the poet begins the series of gnomic statements that make up the poem:

> Gleawe men sceolon gieddum wrixlan. God sceal mon ærest hergan
> fægre, fæder userne, forþon þe he us æt frymþe geteode
> lif ond lænne willan. (4–6a)
>
> [Singers should exchange songs.[10] One ought to first praise God, our father, fittingly, because he provided for us, at the beginning, life and transitory pleasure.]

It is the poet's duty to praise God first because God created the cosmos "æt frymþe," ("in the beginning," 5): the poet's creative activity is again an imitation of God's own creation. By opening the poem with these words the poet of *Maxims I* has managed to follow his or her own directive while at the same time offering it as instruction.

In these poems we discover the elements of an Old English poetic tradition: the emphasis on the "firstness" of Creation, the connection between God's act of Creation and the poet's role, and the resulting notion that it is the first duty of the poet to praise the Creator. These are all elements that are also found in the *herespel*, which begins by emphasizing the firstness of the divine Creation in its own first lines: "Hwæt, on frymþe gescop fæder ælmihtig, / heah hordes weard, heofon ond eorðan" ("Lo, in the beginning, the father almighty, the high guardian of the treasure, shaped heaven and earth," 38–39). Unlike the other samples, however, the *herespel* is based on a Latin original. It is for this reason not a "first" in the same way that either the scop's song or *Cædmon's Hymn* is. Nevertheless, the *herespel* is a new creation; its newness resides in its ability to remake the original through a process of reconstruction, a reconstruction that involves an active transformation of the Latin psalm into an Old English poetic idiom. The Old English version does not attempt to accurately translate the language of the psalm, although it does contain echoes of that language. Instead, it plays with the language of the psalm, starting close to the Latin words, moving away, moving back, and then moving away again. The resulting Old English version is a completely new piece of poetry in which the Latin has been taken apart piece by piece and re-constructed in Old English.

A close look at how this re-working functions reveals the complexity of this playfulness. For the purposes of comparison, I reproduce the relevant verses of Psalm 18:

2) Caeli enarrant gloriam Dei,
   Et opera manuum eius annuntiat firmamentum.
3) Dies diei eructat verbum,
   Et nox nocti indicat scientiam.
4) Non sunt loquelae, neque sermones,
   Quorum non audiantur voces eorum.
5) In omnem terram exivit sonus eorum,
   Et in fines orbis terrae verba eorum.
6) In sole posuit tabernaculum suum;
   Et ipse tanquam sponsus procedens de thalamo suo.
   Exsultavit ut gigas ad currendam viam;
7) A summo caelo egressio eius.

Et occursus eius usque ad summum eius;
Nec est qui se abscondat a calore eius.[11]

[The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament proclaims the works of his hands.
Day speaks to day and night shows knowledge to night.
There are no languages or any speech that does not hear their voices.
Their sound has gone to every land and their words to the ends of the earth.
He has placed his tabernacle in the sun, proceeding like a bridegroom from his chamber. It has exulted like a giant in running a race.
His going out is from the summit of the sky and his circuit to its end. Nor may anyone hide from its heat.]

The Old English poem begins with a loose translation of the second verse of the psalm:

Hwæt, on frymþe gescop fæder ælmihtig,
heah hordes weard, heofon ond eorðan,
sæs sidne grund, sweotule gesceafte,
þa nu in þam þreatum þurh þeodnes hond
heaþ ond hebbaþ þone halgan blæd. (38–42)[12]

[Lo, in the beginning, the father almighty, the high guardian of the treasure, shaped heaven and earth, the great depth of the sea, the visible creations which now in hosts lift up and raise the holy glory through the lord's hand.]

This passage includes several words that point directly to the Latin original: "hond" – "manuum," "heofon" – "caeli," "blæd" – "gloriam," but the Anglo-Saxon poet has clearly done more than translate this passage; he or she has re-created it in a longer form that describes first the creation of the entire cosmos, and secondly the cosmos "lifting up" the glory of God. The form this expansion takes is based partly on the tendency for Old English poetry to double the length of any Latin original in its need for alliterating words, as in the case of "heaþ ond hebbaþ" (42b) for the Latin "enarrant." There is, however, another kind of "Anglo-Saxonizing" going on here. The image of the cosmos praising the Creator has been converted into the formulaic praise of the Creator that occurs throughout Old English poetry. Thus the opening words of the sample poem are as likely to remind us of *Cædmon's Hymn* as of Psalm 18: *Cædmon's Hymn* line 1a reads "heofonrices weard" while the third line of the *herespel* begins "heah hordes weard" (39a). The first two lines of the *herespel* are reminiscent of lines 5 and 6 of *Cædmon's Hymn*: "He ærest sceop eorðan bearnum/ heofon to hrofe, halig scyppend" ("He, the holy maker, first shaped heaven as a roof for the children of the earth," 4–5). The *herespel* reads "Hwæt, on frymþe gescop fæder ælmihtig/ heah hordes

weard heofon ond eorðan," ("Lo, in the beginning, the father almighty, the high guardian of the treasure, shaped heaven and earth," 38–39).

The following two and a half verses of the Latin psalm are expansions on the first verse, focussing on voice and word imagery; night and day have voices that speak. The Old English poem here appears to depart from the Latin, inserting a passage praising God as the maker of the cosmos, who "fastened" all together, and as the Steersman who controls the "measures" of nature. But after this excursus the poem returns to the theme of the cosmos praising God:

> Swa hi to worulde wlite forþ berað
> dryhtnes duguþe ond his dæda þrym,
> lixende lof in þa longan tid,
> fremmaþ fæstlice frean ece word
> in þam frumstole þe him frea sette,
> hluttor heofones weard, healdað georne
> mere gemære. (47–53a)[13]
>
> [Thus they announce to the world the beauty, the glories of the lord and the power of his deeds, glittering praise; through the length of time, they perform steadfastly the eternal word of the ruler in the first seats that the ruler, the bright guardian of heaven, established; willingly they maintain the great circuit.]

Although this passage might appear to be quite distant from the language of the psalm, it is in essence an amplification of the same theme of praise. Old English words are echoes of the Latin: "forþ beraþ" for "exivit," and "frean ece word" for "verba," while "lixende lof," recalls the psalm's central theme of praise.

Following this passage the psalm moves on to speak of the sun as a tabernacle: "He has placed his tabernacle in the sun, proceeding like a bridegroom from his chamber. It has exulted like a giant in running a race. His going out is from the summit of the sky and his circuit to its end. Nor may anyone hide from its heat."

The Old English poem also turns to the subject of the sun, introducing it in an expansive passage on God as Creator and controller of the universe: "meaht forð tihð/ heofoncondelle ond holmas mid" ("[His] might leads forth the heavenly candle and the seas with it," 53b–55). Thereafter, the Anglo-Saxon poet continues the theme of praise (with the word "wuldor" perhaps an echo of the Latin "gloria" from the second verse of the psalm): "Swa him wideferh wuldor stondeþ, / ealra demena þam gedefestan, / þe us þis lif gescop," ("So the praise for him, the kindest of all judges, he who

made this life for us, remains forever," 57–59a). Immediately afterward the poet launches into a powerful description of the sun's movement around the earth, which begins:

> ond þis leohte beorht
> cymeð morgna gehwam ofer misthleoþu
> wadan ofer wægas wundrum gegierwed,
> ond mid ærdæge eastan snoweð
> wlitig ond wynsum wera cneorissum;
> lifgendra gehwam leoht forð bierað
> bronda beorhtost, ond his brucan mot
> æghwylc on eorþan þe him eagna gesihð
> sigora soðcyning syllan wolde. (59b–67)
>
> [And this light brightness comes every morning over the misty darkness traversing the waters, wonderfully adorned, and at daybreak, dawns in the East, radiant and pleasing for the races of men. It bears forth light, the brightest of torches, to each of the living, and each may enjoy it, each of those to whom the true king of victories has given eyesight.]

The Old English poem clearly deals with the dominant image of the sixth and seventh verses of the psalm, the sun's progress around the earth, but it treats the subject in a very different way. Both the psalm and the *herespel* describe the circuit of the sun around the earth and both describe its effects on humankind. But where the psalm presents the heat of the sun neutrally, or possibly as unpleasant ("Nec quidquam subtrahitur ardori eius," "Nor may anyone hide from its heat"), the Old English poem delights in the sun's warmth, exclaiming: "ond his brucan mot / æghwylc on eorþan" ("and each one on earth can enjoy it," 65b–66a). Later, the same word "brucan" is used of the people under the horizon who may also make use of the sun. The Old English poem discards the bridegroom metaphor of the biblical psalm, a metaphor that is not native to Old English poetry as it is to Hebrew poetry. Instead, it expands the description of the sun to twenty-two lines through Anglo-Saxon imagery, and describes the mysterious movement of the sun out of the darkness into the world and back into the dark:

> Gewiteð þonne mid þy wuldre on westrodor
> forðmære tungol faran on heape,
> oþþæt on æfenne ut garsecges
> grundas pæþeð, glom oþer cigð;
> niht æfter cymeð, healdeð nydbibod
> halgan dryhtnes. Heofontorht swegl
> scir gescyndeð in gesceaft godes
> under foldan fæþm, farende tungol.

Forþon nænig fira þæs frod leofað
þæt his mæge æspringe þurh his ægne sped witan,
hu geond grund færeð goldtorht sunne
in þæt wonne genip under wætra geþring,
oþþe hwa þæs leohtes londbuende
brucan mote, siþþan heo ofer brim hweorfeð. (68–81)

[The glorious star departs then in glory to travel in company to the western sky, until in the evening it makes its way out over the deep of the ocean — the second darkness calls; night comes — it holds the command of the holy lord. Resplendent, the heavenly bright sun, the travelling star, hastens according to God's plan, under the embrace of the earth. Therefore there is no man living who is so wise that he can know its source through his own intelligence, know how the golden sun travels around the abyss in that murky darkness under the mass of waters, or what land-dweller might enjoy the light after it journeys over the edge.]

The expansion takes the form not just of an elaboration on the original words of the psalm, but of a complete re-working of the psalm into an Old English idiom. Words for brightness and darkness abound, and the sun takes on the character of a traveller, whose journey, like that of an Anglo-Saxon wanderer, takes it through mysterious far-off regions. Likewise, the sun, whose heat seems threatening in the biblical passage, becomes a welcome radiant star fit for an Anglo-Saxon audience. Bright and golden, it follows its course in accordance with the Lord's decree. The imagery of words and speech from earlier in the poem, and from the original psalm, is transformed into a new form — the word of God controlling his Creation. The Old English poem plays with the language of the psalm, creating a whole new poem, not a translation, but a transformation, a re-working of the fundamental images found in the Latin psalm.

The sort of poetic expansion found in the *herespel* demonstrates a response to both the language of the original text *and to its images*, and this can be explained as a response not only to the spiritual or exegetical content of the reading, but also to the visual detail of the text, an approach which is associated with rumination.[14] As Leclercq has pointed out, monastic readers engaged in rumination could be expected to "picture" the text in their minds, re-creating the visual details for themselves.[15] This aspect of rumination would involve not only the "digestion" of the text's doctrinal significance, but also imaginative play with the imagery, a re-working of the literal language of the Bible. The composition of the *herespel* is a result of the poet's re-working the text of the psalm, a text stored in the poet's memory, into a series of images and formulas that reflect an English poetics.

This re-writing does not revolve around the inclusion of large amounts of exegetical commentary (although there may be some exegetical influence). Rather the poet re-writes on the literal level, developing not the allegorical or figural interpretations that would have been associated with the psalm, but the imagery itself. Thus the Old English version of the sun is largely descriptive, presenting the sun's passage around the world and stopping to reflect on what mysterious viewers might exist in the dark regions under the earth. This sun is the literal sun, not the figurative Christ.[16] The transformation of the psalm into Old English is predominantly a process of re-working the visual world of the psalm, not its figural significance.

But we need not rely on an analysis of the poetry for evidence of rumination. The poem itself describes the process. In the instructions that appear in the introductory section of *The Order of the World*, the poet returns repeatedly to the Creation as a means of instruction, and specifically to the contemplation of the Creation. By searching the creation for its clues to God's wisdom, the apprentice poet will learn how to write:

> Forþon scyle ascian, se þe on elne leofað,
> deophydig mon, dygelra gesceafta,
> bewritan in gewitte wordhordes cræft,
> fæstnian ferðsefan, þencan forð teala. (17–20)
>
> [Therefore the man who lives courageously, the deep-minded man, ought to search out the mysterious creations, inscribe in his wit the word-hord's power, make firm his mind, consider well.]

Here, instead of contemplating the words in the scriptures, the poet is to contemplate the Creation. But the Creation is clearly associated with poetic craft, even writing, since the poet is to inscribe ("bewritan," 19) the words in his mind. And the Creation itself is written; each creature is a sign to be interpreted:

> Is þara anra gehwam orgeate tacen,
> þam þurh wisdom woruld ealle con
> behabban on hreþre, hycgende mon,
> þæt geara iu, gliwes cræfte,
> mid gieddingum guman oft wrecan. (8–12)
>
> [There is a clear sign to the thinking man, each one who through wisdom knows how to contain the world completely in his mind, what in time past, with the power of music men often expressed in poetry.]

The re-creation of the psalm that occurs in the *herespel* is in fact a contemplative reading of Creation. It is entirely appropriate that the psalm

that has provided the *prima materia* for the poet is concerned not only with the Creation but also with the Creation as an entity whose very existence speaks and praises. It is this language of Creation that offers the poet those signs that point to the wisdom of God, and the poet must learn to read and interpret this language in order to write. In this context, the world *is* a book and, like the scriptures, a book whose author is God, or "a master rhetorician," to quote Eric Stanley (238). God, as creator of the cosmos, has created the cosmos as a sign, meaningful to those who understand its significance. Through contemplative reading of this great achievement, the poet is able to digest this book and to re-create it through the medium of poetry.

The conclusion of *The Order of the World* drops the psalm completely and moves on to a long passage of praise for the Creator as cosmic architect followed by a short admonition to leave sin and obey the Creator. This last section concludes the poetry lesson, indicating just how readily a poet could move from the material of the original Latin text, as re- created in Old English, into an Old English amplification on the theme that is independent of the Latin text. The psalm has been so well integrated into the poem that the joining of these two is virtually seamless; the poet connects the two sections with the word *forþon* ("therefore," 82), echoing the use of the same word six lines earlier, so that the final passage appears to be a natural extension of the re-created psalm. The first lines of this concluding section play on the image of joining, specifically God's joining of the elements, while re-creating this concept through the effects of alliteration:

> Forþon swa teofenede, se þe teala cuþe,
> dæg wiþ nihte, deop wið hean,
> lyft wið lagustream, lond wið wæge,
> folde wið flode, fisc wiþ yþum. (82–85)[17]
>
> [Therefore, he joined in this manner, he who knows well how to, day with night, deep with high, sky with stream, land with water, earth with ocean, the fish with the waves.]

The word *swa* ("in this manner," 82) points back to the subject of the previous passages taken from the psalm. Here content and form are one; poetic creation imitates divine as the poet skillfully joins the disparate parts of the poem. The lesson is concluded.

Concordia University, Montreal

NOTES

[1] See Isaacs, 71. The most thorough discussions of *The Order of the World* are found in Isaacs 71–82; and in Huppé 34–61.

[2] Isaacs derives the term from *here* ("praise") and *spel* ("song"). The word "praise-song" would then be Old English terminology for "psalm" (74). It is quite possible, however, that the term means simply "praise-song." Huppé, on the other hand, thinks the term derives from *here* ("military") and means "tale of war" since "the creation is an epic subject, worthy of treatment in the loftiest flights of heroic verse" (40).

[3] Quotations from *The Order of the World* and *Maxims I* are taken from Krapp and Dobbie, eds. *The Exeter Book*. Quotations from *Cædmon's Hymn* are taken from Dobbie, ed. *The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems*.

[4] "Et quidem et alii post illum in gente Anglorum religiosa poemata facere temtabant, sed nullus eum aequiperare potuit. Namque ipse non ab hominibus neque per hominem institutus canendi artem didicit, sed diuinitus adiutus gratis canendi donum accepit."

["It is true that after him other Englishmen attempted to compose religious poems, but none could compare with him. For he did not learn the art of poetry from men nor through a man but he received the gift of song freely by the grace of God."]

Latin text and translation are taken from *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. and trans. Colgrave and Mynors, 414–15.

[5] According to Opland, *Cædmon's Hymn* is an adaptation of the tradition of praising the king to praising God (117). On Cædmon as a continuation of Christian tradition, see Fritz 334–37.

[6] The most thorough discussion of *Cædmon's Hymn* in the context of "origins" is found in Frantzen, especially 139–44.

[7] For a discussion of the relationship between the scop's song and *Cædmon's Hymn* in the context of a tradition of Creation poetry, see Bessinger 91–106. See also Fry for an analysis of the formulaic nature of *Cædmon's Hymn* that indicates how strongly indebted the hymn is to traditional formulas.

[8] A number of critics have noted the parallels between the scop's depiction of cosmic Creation and the construction of Heorot. See Taylor; Irving 89–90; Lee 179–80; Helder.

[9] Other parallels between these two poems are discussed by Lerer 113–15.

[10] Or, "Singers should vary songs." *Wrixlan* means "to change, barter, exchange" (Hall, *Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, s.v. "wrixlan").

[11] *Biblia Vulgata*, ed. Colunga and Turrado.

[12] I have changed the MS *þream* (41a) to *þreatum* as suggested by Mackie 78, and Huppé 42–43. In my translations of *The Order of the World* I have made partial use of Huppé's translation (29–33).

[13] For a thorough analysis of the grammatical construction of this complex passage, see Huppé 44–45.

[14] For discussions of rumination see Leclercq 73–76 and Carruthers 165–70, who also provides a useful discussion of the relationship between reading and composition (191–208). There have been several attempts to analyze the effects of rumination on Old English verse, including Fritz; West; Savage and "Translation as Expansion" in *The Medieval Translator*, ed. Ellis. Also useful is Doane's discussion of Biblical poetry and *Genesis A* (44–58).

[15] "[Imagination] permitted them to picture, to 'make present,' to see beings with all the details provided by the texts: the colors and dimensions of things, the clothing, bearing, and actions of the people, the complex environment in which they move. They liked to describe them and, so to speak, re-create them, giving very sharp relief to images and feelings" (Leclercq 75). See also Carruthers's discussion of Petrarch's refashioning of Virgil: "The active agency of the reader, 'discutiens,' 'breaking up,' or 'shattering' (one could even translate 'deconstructing') each single word as he re-creates the scene in his memory, is emphasized: 'Ego autem audivi . . . audivi . . . audivi.' He re-hears, re-sees, re-feels, experiences and re-experiences" (169).

[16] Huppé (49–50) argues that the sun's journey is symbolic of pilgrimage and that the sun itself is Christ, basing his argument on mediaeval exegesis. There is, however, little in the poem itself to support this argument. The sun moves according to the rules of the lord ("healdeð nydbibod / halgan dryhtnes," "it follows the command of the holy lord," 71b–72a); it is not the lord himself.

[17] I have followed Huppé in emending *flod* (85) to *folde* (Huppé 32).

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