
Article

Cædmon and the gift of song in Black Mountain poetry

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Abstract Robert Duncan's and Denise Levertov's poetic interpretations of Bede's account of Cædmon depict him as the origin of poetic subjectivity, a gift from others and for others. In Duncan's account the visiting figure becomes Friend Song, and the external command to sing is transformed into an envoy for Duncan's own works. Levertov's poem cultivates an alliterative line that draws on the wellspring of Anglo-Saxon verse while playing with the shape of the line. Cædmon retreats among his cattle, 'dumb among body sounds,' and finds there a command to join the dance. In both accounts poetic inspiration constitutes a fusion of body and song, and this embodiment resonates with the songs of voices, calling Cædmon and the poets who join with him into a realm of endless giving, 'into the world that's all of song/commingling,' in Duncan's words, connecting medieval and modern verse.

postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies (2015) 6, 165–173.
doi:10.1057/pmed.2015.21

Each age gets the Anglo-Saxon oral poet it deserves.
– Roberta Frank

Roberta Frank's wry observation about the Anglo-Saxon oral poet appears in her withering analysis of the tendency of scholars to project their theories of Anglo-Saxon versification upon the unsteady historical grounds of Bede's account of the poet Cædmon, the first Anglo-Saxon poet to fuse Christian content with vernacular verse. This tendency often leads to interpretations that reflect scholarly

bias more clearly than historical fact and risk rendering the past malleable and inert. While Frank's critique focuses on the limits of scholars' approaches to Cædmon, it ignores the potential for poets to locate in Cædmon's story a source of creative inspiration and to be drawn into the ambit of Cædmon's song. The gift of Cædmon's story is not the grounding in history that it provides, but the grounding in song and community, bodies enlivened within and across time. Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov, poets associated with the Black Mountain movement, both look to Bede's account of Cædmon as a place of first permission out of a desire not for the historical origins of a particular poetic tradition but for the entry of the poet into the world of song, for the origins of poetic subjectivity. Cædmon's gift of song marks an embodied entry into communal, poetic discourse.

Cædmon first appears in Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* (1991, IV.24). One night as his companions take turns singing songs in Old English, Cædmon excuses himself to bed down with the animals. In the night, a figure appears to him and demands that Cædmon sing a song about *principium creaturarum*, the beginning of created things. Although Bede's account, including 'Cædmon's Hymn' itself, is written in Latin, Cædmon was an unlettered shepherd whose actual verse is effaced through translation into Latin and is only later preserved through marginal notes. The absence of actual oral verse in a narrative putatively about oral verse has led to all manner of scholarly speculation. However, as Roberta Frank has pointed out, the historical reality of Anglo-Saxon oral poetics is not what happens in Cædmon's cowshed but what happens around the fire he has left: 'Bede's story is a beginning and an end: a beginning, because his dreamer achieved a breakthrough for vernacular verse ... But Cædmon is also an end: we shall never know what songs the feasters sang the night he left the banquet early' (Frank, 2003, 154). Even the details of what happens to Cædmon are vague. As Daniel Donoghue has reminded critics, 'The figure who stands by him is described in both the Latin (*quidam*) and Old English (*sum mon*) as merely "someone" (not an angel as is sometimes said), who seems to be a disembodied voice' (Donoghue, 2004, 59). This scholarly tendency to limn the differences between what we want Bede's text to say and what it actually says, to reinforce the difference between text and interpretation, causes modern scholars, leery of past critical excesses that saw Cædmon as the author of much of the biblical verse now extant, to limit Cædmon. But if Cædmon is an end for historical speculation, he is a perennial beginning for poetic inspiration.

Levertov's adaptation is by far the better known than Duncan's, in scholarly literature about both twentieth-century poetry and about Anglo-Saxon adaptations. Continued awareness of its place is assured by its prominence in the *Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature* as the only work by a woman in the chapter on adaptations. Levertov uses Bede's account of Cædmon 'to compose a poem about the raid on the inarticulate that every poet must perform, creating a modern-day, secular origin myth for the creation of the poem out of Bede's own origin myth, and by doing so, [Levertov] breaks her own silence,



becomes her own Cædmon' (Jones, 2013, 328). The poem demonstrates Levertov's own statement of poetics in 'The Poet in the World' that 'The poet does not *use* poetry, but is at the service of poetry' (Levertov, 1967, 137). Her 'Cædmon' works to reinforce this bodily, affective reception of poetry.

The poem begins by interleaving sound and vision, 'All others talked as if talk were a dance,' and Cædmon is out of place: 'Clodhopper, I, with clumsy feet' (3).¹ The alliterative cadence and four stress pattern suggests the line of Old English verse, while the caesura balances the halves of the line even as it points out the syntactic awkwardness of Cædmon's poetic feet. This line offers a contrast to the syntax that follows. Levertov's treatment is rooted in evoking the particulars of experience, focusing especially on the backdrop for Cædmon's transformation. Cædmon retreats from the circle of song to be with the cows, 'dumb among body sounds' (13). The noises of the beasts emphasize the importance of embodiment in the poem, and rather than the beasts being dumb, it is Cædmon who is dumb among their noises. The line also fuses oral and tactile, highlighting the way in which the sound of the animals are both created and felt by bodies, leading Donna Hollenberg to write, 'The synesthesia of Cædmon's response is characteristic of Levertov. ... The sensuousness of Levertov's poetry, most evident in the phrase 'body sounds' to describe the 'warm beasts,' is everywhere in the poem's freedom of movement and ease of gesture, recorded in the flow of lineation across syntax' (Hollenberg, 2013, 361). Their body sounds reinforce Cædmon's silence and suggest the value of natural, un-deliberate rhythms that correspond to the breathing-in of poetic inspiration. This connection between breath and poetic inspiration was important to Levertov, who writes in 'Poetry, Prophecy, Survival' that 'The deepest listening, the ear of imagination, rejects all that merely *says*, that fails to *sing* in some way ... The kinds of experience – the recognitions or revelations – out of which both prophecy and poetry emerge, are such as to stir the prophet or poet to speech that may exceed their own known capacities: they are 'inspired,' they breathe in revelation and breathe out new words' (Levertov, 1992, 148).

It takes the appearance of the angel to awaken Cædmon to the rhythms of the dance. The angel frightens Cædmon, recalling the angels of Rilke's *Duino Elegies*, whose overwhelming existence threatens to consume the poet. For Levertov, in contrast to Rilke, animals provide a measure of comfort, a still place on the margins of society that allows for the possibility of transformation. Levertov omits all the dialogue between Cædmon and the angel in her account, focusing instead on the act of inspiration that lies behind the dialogue, expressive of the internal dialogue Cædmon feels as his 'feeble beam' is effaced by the angel's light 'feathers of flame, sparks upflying' (27). The 'twist/of lit rush' (15–16) by which Cædmon sees recalls Levertov's 'Hunting the Phoenix,' which describes searching through 'discolored manuscripts' (1) in order to find 'a twist of singing flame/rekindling' (15–16), a singing flame which perhaps also sings, like the 'hand of fire' (30) that scorches Cædmon's tongue. The rest of the world is unaffected by

1 This and all following references to poems by Denise Levertov are to Levertov and indicated by line number (Levertov, 2002).

the fact of Cædmon's transformation; its significance is that it impels him to enter into a relationship with the dancing world that surrounds him: 'The Venerable Bede's story of Cædmon ... demonstrates how attentiveness to the material world empowers the imagination and kindles faith. ... Cædmon's full participation in the human community requires that he give utterance to vision: that the Word become word' (Lynch, 1993, 288–289). Poetry becomes a way to enter into embodied discourse, and this leads to the development of poetic subjectivity. Levertov's poem is characterized by a recurrence of the I: the I 'with clumsy feet' (3); the I hunched by the door; the I that 'wipe[s] my/mouth and wend[s] / unnoticed back to the barn' (9–11); the I that sees; the I, finally, right before Levertov's angel appears, that 'was at home and lonely' (23). Levertov's Cædmon is timid, characterized by a subjectivity that is isolated from others, and the angel overwhelms individual existence, pulling Cædmon into a world of communal song and dance.

Robert Duncan's account of Cædmon occurs in two places: his essay 'The Truth and Life of Myth: An Essay in Essential Autobiography' and the poem 'Go, My Songs, Even As You Came to Me.' These two accounts of Cædmon clearly resonate with one another, and neither appears to have been commented upon in the critical literature on Anglo-Saxon adaptation. In the essay, Duncan is discussing the nature of poetic inspiration through the example of his 'A Poem Beginning with a Line by Pindar,' written as Duncan felt the words of Pindar coming unmoored, moving beyond their immediate context, calling forth images and resonances with other works:

When in the inception of "A Poem Beginning with a Line by Pindar," reading late at night the third line of the first Pythian Ode in the translation by Wade-Gery and Bowra, my mind lost hold of Pindar's sense and was faced with certain puns, so that the words *light, foot, hears, you, brightness, begins* moved in a world beyond my reading ... Waking into the reality of the poem, so that the room where I wrote, the fact that I was writing, and the catalytic process of the works of art, passed into the process of the poem itself, dimly underlying the work, as in actual life we may be aware that dream processes are at work, the poem as I wrote forming such a powerful nexus or vehicle of this transcendent reality of Eros and Psyche and of the revelations flowing out of the myth they belonged to, I was hard pressed to keep up with the formations as they came. I cannot make it happen or want it to happen; it wells up in me as if I were a point of break-thru for an "I" that may be any person in the cast of a play, that may like the angel speaking to Cædmon command "Sing me some thing." When that "I" is lost, when the voice of the poem is lost, the matter of the poem, the intense formation of the content no longer comes to me, then I know I have to wait until that voice returns. The return is felt as a readiness, a body tone. (Duncan, 1968b, 17)

Duncan's 'body tone' anticipates Levertov's 'body sounds' and underscores the interpenetration of body and voice. Duncan appears to give much more



importance to the ‘I’ of poetry, whereas Levertov’s ‘I’ was subsumed by the angel’s fire. However, Duncan’s poetic adaptation of Cædmon and his general approach to poetry demonstrate that Duncan’s ‘I’ sings with many voices, caught up in the common grounds of poetry.

Duncan’s adaptation of Bede has likely not attracted much scholarly attention because it is hidden in an unlikely place. ‘Go, My Songs, Even As You Came to Me’ appears in Book 2 of the ‘Dante Études,’ a sequence that appears in *Ground Work: Before the War*. One consequence of the matryoshka-doll structure in which Duncan locates his Bede is that it allows him to build a critical context for interpreting his verse through paratextual matter. *Ground Work* begins with an introductory section entitled ‘Some Notes on Notation’ which states,

The cadence of the verse, and, in turn, the interpenetration of cadences in sequence is, for me, related to the dance of my physical body. My hands keep time and know more than my brain does of measure. Stress patterns are dancing feet; my ear and voice follow a deeper rhythm, the coming and going of a life / death tide back of the heart and the breath. (Duncan, 2006, 3)

The words of Duncan’s song are a part of his bodily experience of the world, and as the body gives a person over to the experience of the world, so does the interpenetration of body and song give Duncan over to the experience of verse. The body becomes a tool for mediating internal and external realities.

In the preface to ‘Dante Études,’ the section in which his adaptation of Bede appears, Duncan notes that the works of the past are ‘translated powers’ and that Dante ‘is not a mind researcht [sic] in the lore of another time, for me, but immediate, everlastingly immediate, to the presence of the idea of Poetry’ (Duncan, 2006, 98). The work is a part of Duncan’s tendency to use poetry to comment upon, articulate through, and interpret the works deriving from multiple sources. Writing about Duncan’s forthrightly derivative poetics, Stephen Collis argues that ‘In terms of intellectual property, the works of the past are here seen as a *commons* upon which all future productions depend’ (Collis, 2012, xvi). This commons appears in the poem ‘Go, My Songs, Even As You Came to Me’ as recollections of stylistic forebears, a series of quotations linked by the connective tissue of Duncan tracing the contours of literary inheritance:

[after Robert Adamson’s opening song in his *Swamp Riddles*:

*Keeping in mind voice-prints that came before you
again I say to those who have forgotten
Go*

meaning to recall to us from Ezra Pound’s *Lustra his “Commission”*:

*Go, my songs, to the lonely and the unsatisfied
... Go out and defy opinion,*

Go against this vegetable bondage of the blood

where he affirms his alliance with the spirits of Whitman and Shelley, and, again, Pound's "Envoi (1919)":

*Go, dumb-born book,
Tell her that sang me once that song of Lawes:
Hast thou but song
... Then there were cause in thee that should condone
Even my faults that heavy upon me lie ...*

breaking the pitch of a modernism for the sake of the beauty of an outworn PreRaphaelite mode and the enduring love he had for Rossetti and William Morris] (Duncan, 2006, 125–126)

These authors are the commons of the poetic form that Duncan is here taking up, and each is a node in an intertextual chain reaching back, with the poems acting as envoys between poets. This practice demonstrates what Stephen Collis calls 'the *social significance* of intertextuality – the model of sociality the pursuit of a radically derivative practice such as Duncan's projects' (Collis, 2012, xvii). What drives this projective, propulsive style is beauty and love, an affective response to poetry that compels an answer in like form. This method of writing and singing through the past comes from a desire to use communal resources as 'cues for our own creation of self,' as a consequence of which Duncan writes, 'I took [Pound's allusions and quotations] to be the voices of many men and of souls stained with recent tears come into the poem and I desired also that there be the recall of other times and the words of other men brought into the music of my own' (Duncan, 1968a, 730).

As Duncan begins the poem proper the singing voice finds itself caught up in the 'zealous liberality' of poetic transmission, of voices singing together and resisting our ability to call our songs 'mine' without acknowledging that they belong to everyone. Duncan begins his account of Cædmon in the third stanza:

Go, songs, even as you came to me,
who had no grace of friendship
from which to sing but
my love of thee, and truthfully
answerd "I cannot sing" – this
was long ago, where "I" began.
Friend Song appeard to me and said,
"However, you shall sing." (Duncan, 2006, 126)

In Duncan's depiction of the never explicitly identified Cædmon, the ability to sing is linked to the development of subjectivity, which is in turn linked to the gift of song. Poetry delivers Cædmon over to himself. He does not begin as 'I' in Duncan's account but as 'me.' The gift of song becomes the means of creating



sense of self, and the 'I' is not possible without the recognition that poetic subjectivity only functions within a community. Duncan's Cædmon has 'no grace of friendship' but the love of the songs he has received. The 'I' of the poem comes about with the admission of incapacity, but it is an incapacity rooted in the mistaken belief that poetry comes from a space inside yourself.

The transformation of the 'someone' in Bede to 'Friend Song' speaks to the bonds formed across time. Even though 'It was another English in that day,' an earlier time, it still is available to the present because that earlier time imprints 'memory with the image / of the command he gave' (Duncan, 2006, 126–127). The synaesthetic intertwining of sound and vision plays out across the words projected on the page, which becomes a means for discovering afresh the origins of poetic subjectivity. As Davidson explains, '[F]or Duncan this search [for first things] is not some sort of constitutive recollection of innocence. Returning to a 'place of first permission' is to see it for the first time. ... That is, the poetic descent into origins occurs in time, the present thus contributing to and changing how those early stories and traumas are reexperienced' (Davidson, 1990, 287). Bede's account of Cædmon works as a site of first permission where English poetry began, but it is not a static past. It is a past imprinted upon the memory, called forth in song and caught up in song's zealous liberality. Duncan's Cædmon testifies to the potential of adaptation to contribute to the continued vitality of old voices singing together with the new. These voices well up within but derive from somewhere else, some place beyond the poet. Friend Song's command fills Cædmon: 'a music sang upon the rift / of overhearing' (Duncan, 2006, 127).

When Cædmon asks his question, 'What shall I sing?' Friend Song replies, 'Make up the song of the beginning / of made-up beings' (Duncan, 2006, 127). There is a beautiful continuity in the movement from 'make up' to 'made-up' in these lines, enabled by Duncan's decision to treat *creaturum* as something made up, analogous to song. The song is not about the beginning but is itself a song of beginning, a song that first sings itself and then sings everything else into existence. The materiality of the made-up world is of song, and it's a song that uses the body as its instrument. Friend Song plays Cædmon, 'as if moving his hands across / strings of me, commanding keys' (Duncan, 2006, 127). The embodiment of the poet leads to synaesthetic experience manifesting in song. Having returned to his site of first permission, the voice of the poet, awakened to subjectivity, draws upon the models of earlier envoys to create its own messenger to others, giving the gift of song:

Go, songs!
 Go with all my giving, Gift!
 Go as you came in dreams,
 Go as you came in poems from an early day,
 Go as you came from friends for your sake,
 Go, song,

into the world that's all of song
commingling! (Duncan, 2006, 127)

Both Duncan and Levertov end with the idea of poetry as a communal activity: a world of song commingling and a ring of dance. This sense of poetry as gift and offering has the potential to open up Anglo-Saxon literature as a source of continual beginnings rather than a period circumscribed by Conquest and ending. Duncan and Levertov sing through Cædmon in vibrant, embodied poetry that gives birth to a communal poetic subjectivity.

About the Author

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