

The rhetorical structure of Layamon's verse

One of the fundamental principles of Old Germanic prosody has been stated by Prof. Sievers in the following words: « Every section must form a grammatical unit, *i. e.* it must contain a word-group that can be separated from the rest, (no account being taken of enclitics and proclitics »⁽¹⁾.)

Old Germanic verse, accordingly, should be studied not only as a combination of stressed and unstressed syllables, divided by pauses, and united by means of alliteration, but also as a rythmical flow of thoughts, progressing and varying in agreement with rules that have been summed up by Prof. Sievers, and commented on by other writers, among whom we shall mention Prof. M. H. Liddell, in his Introduction to the scientific study of English poetry. (L. 1902)⁽²⁾.

But while the rythmical succession of what Prof. Liddell calls ideation-groups and thought-moments is admitted in a general way to be a leading feature of English prosody, little has as yet been done towards a full and systematic inquiry into the laws that govern their combination at different periods and with different writers. We possess neither an accepted method for work in that field, nor any definite tabulated conclusions, such as exist for other departements of the study of metre. Even if the possibility of obtaining results of any permanent interest be doubted, the

⁽¹⁾ « Jede Halbzeile muss sprachlich einheitlich sein, d. h. ein für sich abtrennbares Satzstück enthalten (etwaige En- und Procliticae nicht mitgerechnet »). H. Paul, *Grundriss*, II, 2: Metrik. S. 15, § 22.

⁽²⁾ We also wish to mention Dr. Deutschbein's paper: *Zur Entwicklung des englischen Alliterationsverses*. Halle, 1902.

attempt is worth making, and the present paper, if nothing else, is an expression of the author's curiosity about an attractive problem.

Our inquiry will have a better chance of succeeding if directed to a very early and very simple poem, such as Layamon's Brut. Whatever may be its correct date, that long and uninspiring book is the earliest extensive document for the knowledge of Middle English verse literature. It stands midway between alliteration and rhyme, and the extreme artlessness of its ideas and style make it a fit starting-point for a study of Middle-English verse technique. The principle that every section forms a grammatical unit still prevails in it, while it forms a transition towards more intricate types of verse, such as are found e. g. in William of Palerne. Therefore we selected it as a suitable subject for our experiment.

On entering upon an examination of the thought-moments in Layamon's verse, it would be dangerous to start a newfangled terminology, drawn from the language of logic or psychology. We preferred the humbler and safer course of stating our views in terms of grammar, and we have examined the grammatical character :

1) Of Layamon's short line (Halbzeile), which to avoid confusion we call a section.

2) Of his double or long line (Langzeile) which we call a line.

3) Of the more extensive complex of two or more lines which grammatically is a sentence, and metrically, a verse-paragraph or stanza.

The questions that we tried to answer were :

1) How many sections are co-incident with the thought-moments or ideation-groups in the text? How many contain independent or dependent statements? or mere qualifying adjuncts or ornamental phrases?

2) How are the sections or word-groups joined together into lines, sentences and paragraphs, in other words, what is their structural arrangement?

This then is what for want of a better name we have ventured to call the structure of Layamon's verse : the relation between the merely phonetic distribution of syllables, stresses and feet, on the one hand, and the logical sequence of thoughts, as apparent

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in the syntactical interdependence of word-groups and clauses, on the other. Our inquiry thus comes under the heading of what is called *Stylistik* in German, and included under *Rhetoric* in English terminology.

For the purposes of the present paper we have confined ourselves to the grammatical analyses of the first two hundred sections of Layamon's *Brut*, in the text published by Sir Fred. Madden from M. S. Cott. Calig. A. IX. In that edition initial sections are distinguished from final sections by means of punctuation-signs, so that the unity of the double line is never doubtful.

I. — The Section (*Halbzeile*).

74 (37 p. c.) of the single sections are principal clauses mostly connected with the text by means of pronouns or demonstrative adjectives, but grammatically independent, and containing a full statement including subject and predicate. The extreme monotony of Layamon's verse is sufficiently explained by that large proportion of bare statements of fact. It matters very little that, in three cases, a clause is contracted by the omission of the subject, which is understood from a preceding clause. We only mention this circumstance in evidence of our author's regularity and caution in his handling of syntax.

40 sections (20 p. c.) are dependent clauses, most of which being introduced by a relative pronoun or conjunction, are very similar to principal clauses, if we remember that the Middle English relative pronoun was not distinguished from the demonstrative pronoun, and that it might often be left out, as it is in modern English. Only two of the forty dependent clauses, one causal, one temporal, are not introduced by a relative.

for heo wes his deore bearn (I, p. 8, s. 9.)

seothen Eneas Lauine heuede inomen (I, p. 9, s. 6.)

A further step towards syntactical intricacy is the appearance of prepositional adjuncts, including a preposition, with the noun governed by it and its attributes. 28 (14 p. c.) of the sections bear this character, a few of them assuming the shape of double adjuncts, set off with the alliteration *abab*:

mid wolcnen and mid wedere (I, p. 5, s. 22.)

and mid golde and mid gersune (I, p. 6, s. 14)

or with an inner rhyme :

inne gridhe and inne fridhe (I, p. 9, s. 4) ⁽¹⁾.

Hardly more intricate is the structural arrangement implied in the use of 3 appositions (1,5 p. c.) of 2 accusative adjuncts (1 p. c.) and the joining in one section of adverbs and adjuncts in 3 cases. (1,5 p. c.)

These very simple rhetorical devices account for the structure of 150 sections (75 p. c.), a proportion that will hardly be found to occur anywhere out of Layamon. The residue of 50 sections cannot be analysed separately, and have to be examined in conjunction with their context.

II. — The Line (*Langzeile*)

And the relation between initial and final sections.

From the above figures it appears that the section or half-line is mostly a very marked grammatical and logical unit. May the same be said of the line? No fewer than 18 out of the 100 lines examined are made up of two principal clauses, either coordinated by means of a conjunction, or simply standing beside one another. 6 offer the still very artless combination of a principal clause in the initial and a relative clause in the final section. 3 consist of the two halves of one principal clause, thus offering instances of overflow in the middle pause, which will have to be discussed later on. 8 contain an adjunct in one section and a principal clause in the other. Out of those 8, 4 begin with the adjunct, and the other 4 with the principal clause, so that the rhetorical preeminence of the final section that has been noticed by metrists in Old Germanic alliterative poetry has left no trace in our text.

The total of 35 out of 100 lines which contain full sentences are thus divided by a strong middle pause and consist mostly of a main statement in the initial section, qualified or completed in the final section by accessory matter. The reader's attention thus

⁽¹⁾ This is the type of a line in Bürger's *Lenore* :
Auf Wegen und auf Stegen.

relaxes as he passes from the initial to the final section, and the ideation runs in what for want of a better name we would like to call a falling rhythm.

III. — The complex of four sections or more.

The combinations of more than two sections are not only interesting on account of the variety and intricacy of their inner structure, they are also historically important as the forerunners of the stanzas and staves of later English poetry. Not one complex of an odd number of sections appears among the 200 sections analysed by us, and from this circumstance we may safely conclude that Layamon did not feel simple sections to be independent metrical units, and used them only in couples, each of which formed one line. Whenever a sentence comes to a stop with an initial section, Layamon fills the gap with a botch of a meaningless and useless phrase in parenthesis, which has to supply the final even section. 6 such tags are to be found among the first 200 sections of his poem: all of them stand at the end, not only of a line, but also of a sentence or paragraph.

The length of the sentences varies considerably. Thus we meet with 12 sentences of four sections or two lines, with 6 of six sections or three lines, with 2 of eight, with one of fourteen and one of sixteen sections. The absence of 10 and 12 section complexes is merely fortuitous.

The four section sentences are not only the more numerous, they also show prototypes of the familiar ballad-measures of later times, the rhetorical structure of which must have struck every attentive reader:

For forty days and forty nights
He wade through rivers to the knee
And he saw neither sun nor moon,
But heard the roaring of the sea.

(Thomas Rymer.)

Poor as was Layamon's fancy in devising rhythmical combinations, he did not twice reproduce the same scheme of four sections. 8 out of his 12 four section sentences begin with a principal clause, but the distribution of coordinate and subor-

dinate clauses and adjuncts varies sufficiently within its narrow limits to avoid identity. He thus adheres to his usual course of starting from a new and definite statement, and of tagging on qualifications and additions till, having exhausted his stock, he takes breath before entering upon a fresh train of thoughts.

The same remark applies to 5 out of his 6 sentences of three lines or six sections. But in the sixth the writer boldly ventures upon the experiment of keeping back the principal statement to the end. He sends the adjuncts and relative clauses in advance, and manages to turn out the following spirited stanza, in which the ring of true epic poetry can be discerned :

of kunne and of folke
the fulede than duke,
of monne and of ahte
the he to thare sae brouhite,
and tuenti gode scipen
he gudhliche fulde.

(I, p. 5, s. 14-19.)

The structure of these lines rouses in our memory the echo of the first stanza of the famous Nibelungenlied :

Uns ist in alten maeren	wunders vil geseit
von heleden lobebaeren,	von grözer arebeit
von freude und höchgeziten,	von weinen und von klagen,
von küener recken striten	muget ir nu wunder hoeren sagen.

As for the 4 sentences that comprise eight or more sections, their structure does not differ from that of complexes discussed above. They straggle into shapelessness through their length, as the shorter units of one or two sections drop into shapelessness through their disconnection and baldness.

IV. — Variation.

As Layamon does not aim strenuously at ornament, the instances of variation in his lines are few. Still we have marked a number of sections that carry no original meaning but simply expatiate upon a thought previously expressed. 5 are final sections resuming a subject broached in a preceding initial section.

This again is a decided departure from Old English practice. The 4 other cases of undoubted repetitions are initial sections containing variations of previous initial sections, and two lines repeating the contents of one another. Those cases must be explained as a consequence of what German metrists call *Zeilenstil*, the parallelism being not between single sections, but between whole lines. In one instance only is the thought of a final section repeated in the following initial section.

V. — Parallelism and inversion.

Parallelism is so universal in our text that no exhaustive statistics of it can be given. The same construction is reproduced over and over again, with repetition now of an auxiliary verb, then of a pronoun or preposition. The most striking cases illustrate the rhetorical use of co-ordinate clauses, or of several prepositional adjuncts governed by the same preposition. The six section complex quoted above (from I, p. 5, s. 14-19), might be described as simple parallelism of lines based upon alternate parallelism of sections: the initial section of the first line being echoed in the initial section of the second, and the two final sections answering one another in the same way. Scheme: a b a' b' c d. — Similarly:

fetheren he nom mid fingren
and fiede on boc-felle
and tha sothe word
sette to-gadere
and tha thre boc
thrumde to are. (I, p. 3, s. 13-18.)

Scheme: a a' b c b' c'.

The appearance of inversion is partly due to Layamon's wish to keep together words that are grammatically connected and to join them in the linguistic unit of the section. Sometimes it is due to metrical necessities, such as the order of stresses, and the requirements of alliterations and rhyme. Moreover, the usual and regular order of words in Layamon's time is not sufficiently known to us to enable us to detect departures from it with any certainty. For those various reasons, we must be sparing in our remarks about inversion as a rhetorical device, although its occur-

rence is put beyond doubt by the comparison of three such sections as :

He nom tha Englisca boc (I, p. 2, s. 19.)

an other he nom on Latin (I, p. 2, s. 21.)

boc he nom the thridde (I, p. 3, s. 1.)

in the same paragraph.

As for antithesis, it seems to lie beyond Layamon's reach.

VI. — Overflow.

From what precedes the reader will conclude that overflow must be a scarce phaenomenon in the Brut, and that the middle pause will allow of it more freely than the final pause. This expectation is answered by the facts, although Prof. Sievers's rule does not apply so strictly as to exclude overflow altogether. Take the following lines :

And heuede Eneas the duc
mid his driht folcke
widen iwalken
yend that wide water
moni lond umbe-rowen
redes him trokeden. (I, p. 6, s. 4-9.)

The auxiliary verb *heuede* is separated from its participles past by both a middle and a final pause. But the insertion of the prepositional adjunct in section 5 has the effect of keeping the reader's attention in suspense, so that the division by lines (*Zeilenstil*) passes naturally into a division by stanzas, and the only really final pause is the one after section 9, which is marked by a full stop.

The extremest case of overflow in our passage is :

and he hoe yef thare aedhelen
.Elienor the wes Henries quene
thes heyes kinges. (I, p. 3, s. 6-8.)

Here an adjective is separated from its noun by what can only be a final pause. This instance is too clumsy to admit of any extenuation : it is the exception that strengthens the rule.

The 13 other cases of overflow are all from an initial to a final section, 11 being separations of an object noun from its verb, 2 being separations of an auxiliary verb from its participle. Four out of the six classes of overflow enumerated by Prof. J. B. Mayor (¹) do not occur in our passage at all.

In 4 instances, the middle pause separates a subject from its predicate or from parts of it. The scarcity of even such a mild form of metrical liberty as this shows how narrowly the Middle English poet confined his thoughts within the limits of prosodic forms.

VII.

The above statement of Layamon's practice in the structural arrangement of his verse will confirm the impression of his readers as to the weakness and monotony of his style. But it claims to do something more, as it discovers in the Brut some of the embryos of later stanzaic forms, and provides a standard for comparing Middle English poems by other hands. Our wish was to contribute to work out a method of research in the untilled field that forms the boundary between rhetoric and prosody. If such a method could be applied to later Middle English poets, it would probably disclose an interesting development towards a more intricate and more consciously artificial, while freer, style.

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Liège, July 1907.

(¹) Chapters on English Metre (2^d ed. 1901, pp. 224-227).