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Intonation and Obscurity in Ezra Pound’s Recording of “The Seafarer”

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Intonation and Obscurity in Ezra Pound’s Recording of “The Seafarer”

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In May 1939, while visiting the United States for the first time since 1911, Ezra Pound visited Harvard University to give a public reading of his work. He also agreed to record a selection of his poems for Harvard’s Vocarium Series (Stock 1970:364), under the supervision of Frederick C. Packard, Jr., of the Department of Speech. On May 17, three acetate/metal-backed transcription disks were produced, the contents of which were later regrouped onto two disks now housed in the university’s Lamont Library. Included on these disks is the only known recording of Pound reading his groundbreaking but controversial translation of “The Seafarer,” an anonymous Anglo-Saxon poem in the tenth-century Exeter Book. Critics have noted the importance of this translation both to Pound’s development as a poet (Witemeyer 1969:116; Stock 1970:105; Robinson 1993:239), and to the poetic tradition in general (Eliot 1935:173; Kenner 1953:9; Goodwin 1966:205-8), and there is a substantial literature focusing on whether Pound’s translation is faithful to the Old English original in spirit and content. Little attention has been paid, however, to Pound’s gramophone recording of the poem. Brief comments have appeared in critical works and biographies (e.g., Stock 1970:364; Carpenter 1988:563; Sieburth 2007), but the only publication focusing exclusively on the Harvard recording is a perceptive, if largely impressionistic, essay (“The Oral Text of Ezra Pound’s ‘The Seafarer’”) by the Anglo-Saxonist J. B. Bessinger (1961:173-7).

In the present paper, I will offer further commentary on Pound’s
recording of “The Seafarer” seventy years after it was originally produced, and nearly a century after his translation first appeared in print. My aim is to reconsider, in the light of a recent acoustic analysis of the recording, the issue raised in Bessinger’s 1961 essay and elsewhere, of the possible incoherence of one portion of Pound’s written text of the poem. Although acoustic analysis would have been technically feasible in 1961 — sound spectrography having been developed during World War II — Bessinger seems to have based his comments entirely on unaided listening, within the Widener Library, where the Vocoder recordings were then housed, either to the original gramophone disks, or to copies made from these. He thanks John L. Sweeney, Curator of the library’s Woodberry Poetry Room, only for permission to “describe and discuss” the then unpublished recordings, and his essay contains nothing that would imply he had access to instrumental analysis.1 The present study is based on a digitized version of the original recording of “The Seafarer,” included on the CD The Spoken Word: Poets (British Library, 2003).2

Before turning to the issue of incoherence, I will draw attention to several points at which the Harvard recording diverges from print versions of Pound’s translation. These are of interest here less for their content, which is of little consequence to the reception of the poem, than for the fact that Bessinger uses these divergences to situate his claim that Pound’s translation is at times impenetrable, incoherent, either “mistranslated or misprinted,” and in need of revision.

“The Seafarer” first appeared in the November 30, 1911, issue of The New Age,3 where it contained numerous minor misprints and infelicities of punctuation, which Pound amended before republishing the poem in his collection Ripostes of Ezra Pound the following year. Aside from these initial light corrections, Pound made no further alterations to the text, with the single exception of a change, later revoked, from layed to laid in Cathay (1915). However, as just noted, in the 1939 recording he deviated
from the wording of both the original and corrected texts. Bessinger (1961:175) lists three instances in which he believes Pound made changes — two insertions of *the* and elision of the adjective *fair* — and suggests that such modifications can be seen as “smoothing” of the poem’s “stern angularity” in “sequences of crowded syllabic emphasis”:

Beats out the breath from (*the*) doom-gripped body [l. 72]

Frame on the *fair* earth ’gainst foes his malice. [l. 76]

Nor (*the*) gold-giving lords like those gone. [l. 85]

My examination of the recording using Praat, a publicly available program for the analysis and reconstruction of acoustic speech signals, confirmed two of these adjustments but revealed no trace of vocalization between *nor* and *gold-giving*. The analysis also revealed three minor points of variance which Bessinger does not mention: a weakly articulated *that* at the beginning of l. 11; a weak *and* prefacing l. 70; and, in l. 80, reduction of the quadruple consonant cluster [fsbl] in *life’s-blast* at the expense of a semantically dispensable possessive:

[…] chafing sighs

(*that*) Hew my heart round and hunger begot
Mere-weary mood. […]

[…]

I believe not
That any earth-weal eternal standeth
Save there be somewhat calamitous
(*and*) That, ere a man’s tide go, turn it to twain.

Aye, for ever, a lasting *life’s-blast*
These additional changes can also be seen as “smoothing,” though the third facilitates articulation rather than meter or rhythm.

Bessinger makes much of the fact that, although the Harvard recording varies in minor ways from the published text of the poem, Pound did not take this opportunity to alter any of the wordings that had puzzled critics over the years. Bessinger concludes that the reading therefore “gives new authority to printed versions of [the] poem” in places where “some kind of textual revision” is required (p. 175). This conclusion might be warranted were it clear both that Pound varied from the published text intentionally and, more fundamentally, that he would have undertaken more substantial adjustments if he had found the text to be flawed. However, there is reason for doubt in both regards. The “smoothed” wordings in the recording are so unobtrusive that they could easily have been inadvertent. At least one of these changes is rather clearly of this kind: the insertion of and in line 70, while it may somehow assist the rhythm, makes a shambles of the syntax. Moreover, it is reasonable to suppose that Pound would have hesitated to deny artifactual independence to a poem that had by 1939 become well known, and that he had openly proclaimed to be “as nearly literal, I think, as any translation can be” (Pound 1912a:369).

We may never know whether Pound deviated intentionally from the written text when he recorded “The Seafarer,” nor whether he had by then come to regard some passages in the poem as ineffective. What is clear is that Pound’s critics, even in many cases those who have commended the translation as a whole, have been baffled by certain of his wording choices and have found some portions of the poem incomprehensible (see, e.g., Bessinger 1961:175-6; Alexander 1979:78). Such reactions, regardless of what Pound’s own view may have been, can only be assessed in relation to the published texts of the poem themselves, both written and spoken, and the contexts on which their interpretation depends. It is with this in mind that I turn now to the section of the poem that has most often aroused
dismay. The passage in question, the final orthographic sentence of the poem, comprises the 10 lines quoted below:7

92 No man at all going the earth's gait,
93 But age fares against him, his face paleth,
94 Grey-haired he groaneth, knows gone companions,
95 Lordly men are to earth o'ergiven,
96 Nor may he then the flesh-cover, whose life ceaseth,
97 Nor eat the sweet nor feel the sorry,
98 Nor stir hand nor think in mid heart,
99 And though he strew the grave with gold,
100 His born brothers, their buried bodies
101 Be an unlikely treasure hoard.

This portion of the translation is more or less self-contained. It is in broad outline a statement of human impermanence. The meaning of the Anglo-Saxon for lines 92-8 is relatively uncontroversial. A fairly literal prose translation would be:

Just as it does for every man throughout the world, old age comes upon him; his face becomes pale; the grey-haired (man) mourns; he knows that his past friends, the sons of nobles, have been committed to the earth. When his life fails, he cannot use his body, and he/it can neither taste what is sweet, nor feel pain, nor move his/its hand, nor think with his/its mind.

The meaning of the Old English corresponding to Pound’s lines 99-101 remains disputed. Alexander (1981:70) describes the syntax of the Anglo-Saxon at this point as “obscure” and “very hard to follow.” Since my interest here is in Pound’s alleged incoherence rather than that of the
original, I will concern myself below exclusively with lines 96-8, which have provoked the deepest critical consternation.

Alexander claims that line 96, by distorting the natural word order, gives rise to an “oddity” by which Pound intended to “throw [the line] out of prose.” This presupposes that cover is a verb dislocated through inversion with its object (the flesh). Bessinger (1961:176) had earlier considered this possibility, noting, however, that if we accept it as Pound’s intention, the hyphen must be considered an “intrusive error.” But since, as already noted, Pound did not hesitate, in Ripostes, to rectify many other far less obtrusive punctuation anomalies in the poem, it is unlikely he would have let pass an error which blocks the reading he supposedly intended for the line. The more reasonable option, it seems, is to accept the hyphen as intentional, and to take flesh-cover as a compound noun.

The recording provides several kinds of evidence bearing on this point. We can first examine the relative stressing of the two component morphemes of flesh-cover as reflected in their pitch. Acoustic analysis reveals that the vowel in flesh is produced at a mean pitch almost identical to that of the vowel in the initial syllable of cover. This in itself means little, since Pound reads the poem with a stylized intonation in which ordinary variations in pitch tend to be overridden by a superimposed tier structure of pitch levels, without significant tier-internal variation (Schourup, 2010). A difference in stress might still be reflected in relative intensity, and flesh is in fact spoken with greater overall intensity than is the first syllable of cover. This is what would be expected of a compound noun, whereas, all things being equal, greater or equivalent intensity in the first syllable of cover would be expected if cover were meant as a verb. However, all things are not necessarily equal, and so this argument, too, must be qualified. The problem is that Pound could just as well have pronounced flesh with greater intensity for a reason unrelated to its status as the initial element of a compound. In particular, he can be heard as
stressing *flesh* contrastively to oppose it to the more external matter of losing companions, mentioned in the previous line. In the end, the most that can be said based on the greater prominence of *flesh* alone, is that this prominence is not inconsistent with *flesh* being a noun adjunct in a compound.

We can also, however, examine lines 96-8 as a whole for evidence bearing on the grammatical role of *flesh-cover* in the entire sentence. Assuming *flesh-cover* to be a compound, the line admits of two parsings, one of which is entertained by Bessinger (1961:176): “Possibly the translator misconstrued the subject of the sentence without noticing that the auxiliary verb (which is conative, not permissive) now lacks a complement.” To see what Bessinger is getting at here, we must turn to the Anglo-Saxon original, given below with the corresponding line numbers in Pound’s translation, and with hemistiches printed on separate lines:

[96] Ne mæg him þonne se flæschoma
þonne him þæt feorg losað
[97] ne swete forswelgan
ne sar gefelan
[98] ne hond onhreran
ne mid hyge þencan.

Bessinger states that the meaning of the original at this point is unambiguous and can be translated as, “Then, when life escapes him, his fleshly form cannot taste what is sweet, nor feel pain, nor stir a hand, nor think with the mind” (ibid., 176). On this translation, the subject is “his fleshly form” (corresponding to Pound’s “the flesh-cover”), and the possible misconstrual Bessinger alludes to would seem to be Pound’s identification of the subject as the seafarer himself. In saying Pound may have failed to notice that *mæg* lacks a complement, Bessinger suggests
that Pound’s translation is paraphrasable as “Nor may he – that is, the flesh-cover whose life ceaseth – then [missing complement]. Nor may he taste what is sweet, [etc.].” This reading is, on the surface, even less plausible than the one on which the hyphen in flesh-cover is taken to be an “intrusive error.” If Pound did indeed see mæg as an auxiliary, he could not have failed to notice that it lacks a complement, since dependence on a main verb is fundamental to auxiliary status. It is this, no doubt, that led Bessinger to think that neither of the possibilities he considered had much to recommend it, and to conclude that the passage is “impenetrable” (ibid., 176).

However, before abandoning the possibility that Pound’s may is an auxiliary lacking a complement, it is necessary to consider the further possibility that, rather than failing to notice the absence of a complement, he elided the complement intentionally, believing readers would be able to supply mentally what had been omitted, just as they do in more routine cases of recoverable ellipsis. In deciding whether this was Pound’s intention, it is possible to draw on acoustic, grammatical, and contextual evidence.

To begin with, consider a possible ambiguity arising from the five uses of nor in Pound’s translation of the passage. The Anglo-Saxon word in each case is ne. Ne can be translated as not or, when used with one or more other instances of ne, as neither… nor (... nor). Pound retains the repetition in the original by employing nor in all five cases, whereas in a more prosaic rendering the first ne would have been neither or not (see, e.g., Gordon 1960:64-5). Although the decision to use nor throughout preserves the original repetition, it also leaves room for two possible readings of the sentence, roughly paraphrasable as in (a) and (b):

a. He—the flesh-cover whose life ceaseth—can’t either taste what is sweet or feel pain, or move his hand, or think with his brain.
b. He can’t then [elided verb] the flesh-cover, whose life ceaseth. Nor can he taste what is sweet or feel pain, or move his hand, or think with his brain.

On both readings, flesh-cover is a compound noun, but in (a) it serves as the head a complex appositive noun phrase containing a relative clause, while in (b) the compound is the object of an elided verb. Either grammatical analysis would be expected to leave traces in the audio version of the poem. If (a) were the intended reading, we would expect the appositive to begin at reduced pitch, and possibly to be preceded by a pause. But since, as noted earlier, Pound superimposes a tier structure of pitch levels throughout the poem, the burden of signaling the appositive would more likely fall to the preceding pause. As expected, “the flesh-cover” does not begin with a pitch depression, but there is also no preceding pause: the noun phrase is run together with the preceding “Nor may he then.” This in itself makes it difficult to obtain the (a) reading. There is a fall on the relative pronoun whose, giving way to a rise preparatory to a clear tonic fall on life, both of which features again seem to favor the (b) reading in that, while an internal appositive as in the (a) reading would typically exhibit a low-profile, atonic, parenthetical rendering throughout, a terminal relative clause is often produced with a down-step in pitch and commonly includes a tonic syllable. These facts all lend support to the view that the reading Pound intended is closer to (b) than to (a). The fact that line 97 (“Nor eat the sweet nor feel the sorry”) has a noticeably higher pitch onset than line 96—in high pitch onset being associated with initiation (see Wichmann 2000: 24-48)—is also suggestive of a meaning resembling (b), which entails a strong syntactic break before “Nor eat.” There is no such break in the (a) reading; on that reading a pitch reset at this point would be inconsistent with resumption of the main clause after the appositive. Finally, the (a) reading entails a peculiar use of
nor, mentioned earlier: the first use of this word in line 97 would normally be replaced by either on such a reading.

But if we adopt (b) as the intended reading, the problem of the elided verb remains. If the verb is to be provided by the reader/listener, the line may seem to be defectively translated, since modern English may does not allow a partially elided complement of this kind. In a supportive context, I can say simply “I may” to mean that I may attend the reception, but not “I may the reception.” (Some speakers find the latter locution marginally acceptable in parallel structures, as in “I can’t attend the wedding, but may the reception,” but no such support is present in line 96.)

The possibility remains, however, that Pound had in mind an earlier usage of may. Throughout SFR he makes use of archaic forms (e.g., nathless, benumbed, scur, and two dozen verbal -(e)th forms) to suggest the poem’s antiquity. The translation is also thick with creative hyphenated compounds of various kinds, which approximate Anglo-Saxon kennings and thus further age the text (Schourup, 2006).10 If earlier uses of may sometimes allowed a partially elided complement, Pound might have made use of a similar ellipsis, again in the service of archaism, in his line 96. The O.E.D. does mention use of may with an elided verb, but specifies that the ellipsis applied only to do, be, and verbs of motion. Cases of elided do seem to come closest to the possible ellipsis in Pound’s line 96:

If it had been the pleasure of him that may all things.
[Thos. Morley, A Plaine and Easie Introduction to practicall musicke. 2 (1596)]

In Pound’s line, however, the omitted verb would have to be something like use, utilize, or make use of, for which such ellipsis apparently has no precedent.
Or might it be wrong to see Pound’s *may* as a stranded auxiliary? There is copious evidence for early use of *may* as a main verb meaning “be strong; have power or influence; prevail,” which developed into the later auxiliary use, though here too there appear to have been restrictions that are inapplicable in the case of Pound’s line. The O.E.D. specifies that when the “have power (etc.)” use of *may* occurred with a nominal object, the object had to be cognate (*might* or *power*), as in this example:

*God help him that all mychtis may!* [John Barbour, *The Bruce* III. 366 (1375)]

This is not what we find in Pound’s line 96; however, it is possible that he was familiar with this usage and extrapolated from it to the use of *may* in that line.

On the whole, the delivery of line 96 on the Harvard recording seems best to suggest an interpretation either with elision of *use* (or a synonymous verb), or with *may* as a main verb and *the flesh-cover* as its object: in either case, the dying person is understood to lack power over his body. If Pound is alluding in this line to the fact that as we begin to die, we are unable to *use* the body, the line, provided we grant him a dash of grammatical archaism, is not a bad rendering of the intent behind the original Anglo-Saxon. Indeed, I. L. Gordon (1961:63), in connection with her detailed commentary on the Exeter text of the poem, while offering no complete translation of the line, glosses *mæg* in this context as “be of avail” so that we find the seafarer unable to, as it were, avail himself of his body.

It can be objected that this reading forces modern readers to abandon current English usage, and that Pound’s line is therefore a tactical failure. However, while the line is disconcerting if we insist on pinning it to standard usage, it must also be said that it causes scant concern when
encountered in context as emotive speech.

Throughout his translation, Pound is concerned to present a man who feels compelled by circumstances to communicate the brutal intensity of his experience. The persona of the poem is portrayed not as a man of words, but as a man whose “heart burst[s] from [his] breastlock” (SFR, l. 59), a man “believing in silence” who “found himself unable to withhold himself from speaking” (Pound 1918:64). In Pound’s rendering, the seafarer’s words seem to twist and groan under the strain of unaccustomed verbalization, a quality apparent from the very first line:

May I for my own self song’s truth reckon

Here, cleaving to the sound of the original (Mæg ic be me sylfum soðgied wrecan), Pound resorts to the awkward “song’s truth” in translating soðgied (true song),11 in a line which in a more literal translation would be much more tame (“I can make a true song about me myself”). In this line, too, Pound encounters what Bessigner terms “conative” mæg and again translates it as may, though here on the most accessible reading may expresses neither permission nor possibility, but rather marks the utterance as an expression of hope (see Quirk et al. 1985:147-8) so that the seafarer is heard as invoking the aid of his own unpracticed verbal powers.

It is in this broad context, I suggest, that line 96 should be evaluated. The problem in reading the line, from this standpoint, lies less in appreciating the drift of the passage as a whole, which is relatively clear, than in expecting the seafarer to hold to standards of usage that are alien to him and that he may even disdain. Within the prevailing dramatic context, it is the passionate persona of the seafarer himself who makes the unsettled wording choices in the poem, and, in so doing, inadvertently reveals his state of mind.

The line in question shares a feature with other alleged failures of
expression in the poem. In a number of such cases, Pound’s word choices have been thought to reflect callow misreadings of the Old English. Anglo-Saxonists and others have repeatedly referred to the resulting “mistranslations” — for example the notorious rendering of wrecan (utter, recite) in line 1 as reckon as “schoolboy howlers.” However, recent criticism argues that in most such instances Pound knowingly compromised the meaning to approximate the aural quality of the medieval text (see, especially, Robinson 1982) and thereby preserve its “‘Anglo-Saxon’ power” (Moody 2007:171). Pound was willing to forgo semantic precision for the sake of sound, provided doing so enabled him to reproduce, or heighten, the impact of the original. Thus, in the example just given, while reckon and wrecan are not cognate, reckon accomplishes in context very nearly what wrecan did in the source text.

In line 96 Pound is once more attempting to preserve the sound and thereby the impact of the original, but here the question is not so much whether an etymologically or semantically inappropriate word successfully carries its burden in context, as whether a moment of grammatical “stretch” can be tolerated as both in character for the seafarer persona and broadly intelligible at a highly charged and contextually rich point in the text. Opinions will probably always differ as to whether Pound here pushed his readers too far. But whether or not the oddity of the wording at this point in the text is regarded as problematic, there would seem to be little ground for putting it down to a careless lapse of coherence. If the choice is between seeing Pound as, on the one hand, straying unwittingly into gibberish and, on the other, as asking his reader to make a grammatical leap in the interests of aesthetic effect, it should be clear which view accords best both with Pound’s known views on translation and with the overall attentiveness of his work.
Notes

1. His only quantitative statement about the recording is an estimate, apparently off by ten seconds, of its length.
2. The recording can also be accessed at http://hcl.harvard.edu/libraries/houghton/collections/poetry_room.html, at http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Pound.html, and elsewhere.
3. The poem appeared as the first contribution in a series of twelve articles by Pound collectively titled “I Gather the Limbs of Osiris.”
4. The Praat program, developed by Paul Boersma and David Weenink of the University of Amsterdam, can be accessed at http://www.fon.hum.uva.nl/praat/.
5. Bessinger allows that these adjustments might “derive from accidental circumstances in the act of performance” (p. 175), a phrasing that seems not quite to concede that they may have been made unconsciously.
6. Here somewhat seems only to admit the reading “something,” presumably imported to this context from uses like “The origin of the word ‘Ourigan’ is somewhat of a mystery.” Note that while the and in this line is grammatically out of place, the that in the first example is acceptable, though it appropriates the verb phrase for use in a relative clause. It is conceivable that Pound intended hew as an (inaccessibly) archaic past tense, corresponding to O.E. heow.
7. The version of the passage quoted here is that in Ripostes of Ezra Pound (1912), in which this passage differs from the original 1911 text only in the substitution of a comma for a semicolon after gait in l. 92.
8. Marsden (2004:228) reads him… se flæschoma as possibly dative, thus meaning “his body,” which then serves as the subject of the following two lines.
9. Pound accompanied himself halfheartedly on two kettledrums during
the reading, occasionally striking one of them at points of emphasis. A soft drumbeat appears on the word *life* in this passage.

10. Pound later exploited the same technique in translating a passage from *The Odyssey* in Canto 1 of *The Cantos*.


**References**


