

Two Old English Elegies from the Exeter Book: *The Wanderer and The Ruin*

Most of the Old English poetry that has survived is contained in only four manuscripts. The richest and most diverse of these is Exeter Cathedral Library MS 3501, a large anthology of secular and religious poems. The book was given to the Cathedral library at Exeter by the bishop Leofric some time before 1072 CE (and has remained there ever since), but it was written probably a century earlier, somewhere in the south of England. Because some pages have been lost from the manuscript, we cannot say how many poems it originally contained, and we do not know the impulse behind its compilation. But the Exeter Book is a fascinating and miscellaneous collection which ranges from serious religious poetry on the Advent and Ascension of Christ, to verse lives of St Guthlac and Juliana, to a reworking of a Latin poem on the Phoenix, to a collection of almost 100 verse riddles which are often comical or obscene. The poems are probably by many different authors; a poet named Cynewulf encoded his own name (in runes) in two poems, *Juliana* and *Christ II*, but all others are anonymous and untitled.

The Exeter Book includes a group of short philosophical poems, differing in style and outlook but similar in tone, which have come to be known as 'elegies': these are *The Wanderer*, *The Seafarer*, *Wife's Lament*, *The Ruin*, *Wulf and Eadwacer*, *The Husband's Message*, and a few others. The label 'elegy' is potentially misleading: in Greek and Latin literature the term refers to a particular metrical form, and since the sixteenth century the word has been used in English literature to describe a lament or poem of mourning (the most famous examples of classic English 'elegies' include Milton's *Lycidas*, Shelley's *Adonais*, and Tennyson's *In Memoriam*). But the term 'elegy' is sometimes used more loosely to describe any serious meditative poem, and it is this sense that these Old English poems should be considered 'elegies'. The poems share certain themes and concerns – the passage of time and the transience of earthly things, the pain of exile and separation, the ache of absence and longing – as well as certain images and scenes such as ruined or abandoned buildings, desolate landscapes, storms at sea, darkness, night and the chill of winter. These themes, and the traditional language in which they are presented, are found in other Old English poems—certain passages of *Beowulf* may be called 'elegiac', if not outright 'elegy'—and the contemplation of earthly instability sometimes seems to pervade Old English literature. The tone and language of elegy may have roots deep in the traditions of Germanic poetry, but it is also influenced by late classical works such as Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*; the recognition that the "world under the heavens" is a place of tragic impermanence would probably be regarded as equally good Christian doctrine and pagan wisdom.

Most of the Old English elegies are monologues spoken by an unidentified character whose situation is unclear but who seems to be cut off from human society and the comforts of home and friendship. But even though they share the poetic language of exile and longing, each poem has its own shape and purpose, and each makes its own statement about the problems and possibilities of earthly life. *The Wanderer* laments the passing of a whole way of life, the heroic world of the warrior's hall; *The Wife's Lament* is a poem of intense personal longing for an absent husband or lover. *The Seafarer* is explicitly and even aggressively homiletic and Christian; *The Ruin* is more detached and dispassionate about the scene it describes and its moral judgments, if anything, are implicit and indirect.

Most of the Exeter Book elegies have some structural and interpretive difficulties. *The Wanderer* is a dramatic monologue with a prologue and epilogue, but the beginnings and endings of speeches are not indicated in the manuscript and can only be guessed at. *The Seafarer* switches tone so radically that many readers (including Ezra Pound, who produced a

vigorous modern translation) have simply rejected the second, more homiletic half. *The Wife's Lament* is obscure more by virtue of its language than its structure—a number of the poem's key terms are ambivalent or uncertain. And the pages of the Exeter Book containing *The Ruin* has been damaged and the poem is itself a ruin, crumbling into incoherence. The poems develop philosophical arguments and present evidence and conclusions, but Old English poetic language is not necessarily congenial to the demands of precise reasoning; sentence boundaries and relationships between clauses are often uncertain. And yet despite these interpretive problems, the Exeter Book 'elegies' are among the most moving and powerful poems in Old English; their vision of life as both infinitely precious and inevitably transitory still strikes a responsive chord in the minds of many readers.

The Wanderer

Always the one alone longs for mercy,
 the Maker's mildness, though, troubled in mind,
 across the ocean-ways he has long been forced
 to stir with his hands the frost-cold sea,
 and walk in exile's paths. *Wyrð* is fully fixed!¹ 5

Thus spoke the Wanderer, mindful of troubles,
 of cruel slaughters and the fall of dear kinsmen:²
 "Often alone, every first light of dawn,
 I have lamented my sorrows. There is no one living
 to whom I would dare to reveal clearly 10
 my deepest thoughts. I know it is true
 that it is in the lordly nature of a nobleman
 to closely bind his spirit's coffer,
 hold his treasure-hoard, whatever he may think.
 The weary mind cannot withstand *wyrð*, 15
 the troubled heart can offer no help,
 and so those eager for fame often bind fast
 in their breast-coffers a sorrowing soul,
 just as I have had to take my own heart —
 often wretched, cut off from my homeland, 20
 far from dear kinsmen — and bind it in fetters,
 ever since long ago I hid my gold-giving friend
 in the darkness of earth, and went wretched,
 winter-sad, over the binding waves,
 sought, hall-sick, a treasure-giver, 25
 wherever I might find, far or near,

¹ *Wyrð* is the Old English word for Fate, a powerful but not quite personified force. It is related to the verb *weorthan*, meaning roughly 'to occur'. Its meanings range from a neutral 'event' to a prescribed 'destiny' to a personified 'Fate'; it is useful to think of *wyrð* as 'what happens', usually in a negative sense. In a poem so preoccupied with puzzling over the nature and meaning of *wyrð*, it seemed appropriate to leave the word untranslated.

² The Exeter Book manuscript in which the poem survives does not have quotation marks, or clear indications of where one speech begins and ends in this poem; we are not sure whether lines 1-5 are spoken by the same character that speaks the following lines, or whether they are the narrator's opinion on the general situation of the Wanderer.

someone in a meadhall who knew of my people,
 or who'd want to comfort me, friendless,
 accustom me to joy. He who has come to know
 how cruel a companion is sorrow 30
 to one who has few dear protectors, will understand this:
 the path of exile claims him, not patterned gold,
 a winter-bound spirit, not the wealth of earth.
 He remembers hall-holders and treasure-taking,
 how in his youth his gold-giving lord 35
 accustomed him to the feast—that joy has all faded.
 And so he who has long been forced to forego
 his dear lord's beloved words of counsel will understand:
 when sorrow and sleep both together
 often bind up the wretched exile, 40
 it seems in his mind that he clasps and kisses
 his lord of men, and on his knee lays
 hands and head, as he sometimes long ago
 in earlier days enjoyed the gift-throne.³
 But when the friendless man awakens again 45
 and sees before him the fallow waves,
 seabirds bathing, spreading their feathers,
 frost falling and snow, mingled with hail,
 then the heart's wounds are that much heavier,
 pain after pleasure. Sorrow is renewed 50
 when the memory of kinsmen flies through the mind;⁴
 he greets them with great joy, greedily surveys
 hall-companions — they always swim away;
 the floating spirits bring too few
 well-known voices. Cares are renewed 55
 for one who must send, over and over,
 a weary heart across the binding of the waves.⁵
 And so I cannot imagine for all this world
 why my spirit should not grow dark
 when I think through all this life of men, 60
 how they suddenly gave up the hall-floor,
 mighty young retainers. Thus this middle-earth
 droops and decays every single day;
 and so a man cannot become wise, before he has weathered
 his share of winters in this world. A wise man must be patient, 65
 neither too hot-hearted nor too hasty with words,
 nor too weak in war nor too unwise in thoughts,
 neither fretting nor frivolous nor greedy for wealth,
 never eager for boasting before he truly understands;
 a man must wait, when he makes a boast, 70
 until the brave spirit understands truly

³ The description seems to be some sort of ceremony of loyalty, charged with intense regret and longing.

⁴ Or “when the mind surveys the memory of kinsmen.”

⁵ The grammar and reference of this intense, almost hallucinatory scene is not entirely clear; the translation reflects one commonly-proposed reading.

whither the thoughts of his heart will turn.

The wise man must realize how ghostly it will be
when all the wealth of this world stands waste,
as now here and there throughout this middle-earth 75
walls stand blasted by wind,

beaten by frost, the buildings crumbling.
The wine halls topple, their rulers lie
deprived of all joys; the proud old troops
all fell by the wall. War carried off some,

80

sent them on the way, one a bird carried off
over the high seas, one the gray wolf
shared with death—and one a sad-faced man
covered in an earthen grave. The Creator
of men thus wrecked this enclosure, 85
until the old works of giants stood empty,
without the sounds of their former citizens.⁶

He who deeply considers, with wise thoughts,
this foundation and this dark life,
old in spirit, often remembers 90

so many ancient slaughters, and says these words:

‘Where has the horse gone? where is the rider? where is the giver of gold?

Where are the seats of the feast? where are the joys of the hall?

O the bright cup! O the brave warrior!

O the glory of princes! How the time passed away,
slipped into nightfall as if it had never been! 95

There still stands in the path of the dear warriors
a wall wondrously high, with serpentine stains.

A torrent of spears took away the warriors,
bloodthirsty weapons, *wyrd* the mighty, 100
and storms batter these stone walls,

frost falling binds up the earth,
the howl of winter, when blackness comes,
night’s shadow looms, sends down from the north

harsh hailstones in hatred of men. 105

All is toilsome in the earthly kingdom,
the working of *wyrd* changes the world under heaven.

Here wealth is fleeting, here friends are fleeting,
here man is fleeting, here woman is fleeting,
all the framework of this earth will stand empty.” 110

So said the wise one in his mind, sitting apart in meditation.

He is good who keeps his word,⁷ and the man who never too quickly
shows the anger in his breast, unless he already knows the remedy,
how a nobleman can bravely bring it about. It will be well for one who seeks mercy,
consolation from the Father in heaven, where for us all stability stands. 115

⁶ Ruined buildings are called ‘the work of giants’ (*enta geweorc*) in several places in OE literature.

⁷ Or ‘keeps faith’. These last lines offer an answer to the Wanderer’s unresolved melancholia – the wisdom of self-control and the hope of Christian salvation.

The Ruin

Wondrous is this foundation – the fates have broken
 and shattered this city; the work of giants crumbles.
 The roofs are ruined, the towers toppled,
 frost in the mortar has broken the gate, 5
 torn and worn and shorn by the storm,
 eaten through with age. The earth's grasp
 holds the builders, rotten, forgotten,
 the hard grip of the ground, until a hundred
 generations of men are gone. This wall, rust-stained
 and covered with moss, has seen one kingdom after another, 10
 stood in the storm, steep and tall, then tumbled.
 The foundation remains, felled by the weather,
 it fell.....⁸
 grimly ground up
cleverly created....
 15
 a crust of mud surrounded ...
 put together a swift
 and subtle system of rings; one of great wisdom
 wondrously bound the braces together with wires.
 Bright were the buildings, with many bath-houses, 20
 high noble gables and a great noise of armies,
 many a meadhall filled with men's joys,
 until mighty fate made an end to all that.
 The slain fell on all sides, plague-days came,
 and death destroyed all the brave swordsmen; 25
 the seats of their idols became empty wasteland,
 the city crumbled, its re-builders collapsed
 beside their shrines. So now these courts are empty,
 and the rich vaults of the vermilion roofs
 shed their tiles. The ruins toppled to the ground, 30
 broken into rubble, where once many a man
 glad-minded, gold-bright, bedecked in splendor,
 proud, full of wine, shone in his war-gear,
 gazed on treasure, on silver, on sparkling gems,
 on wealth, on possessions, on the precious stone,⁹ 35
 on this bright capital of a broad kingdom.
 Stone buildings stood, the wide-flowing stream
 threw off its heat; a wall held it all
 in its bright bosom where the baths were,

⁸ Several lines are lost here; the translation tries to make sense of a few surviving words, but this section is best skipped when reading the poem.

⁹ The singular form here is unexpected, but may be nothing more than a collective noun.

hot in its core, a great convenience. 40
 They let them gush forth
 the hot streams over the great stones,
 under...
 until the circular pool hot...
where the baths were. 45
 Then....
 that is a noble thing,
 how the city¹⁰

translations: RML

¹⁰ The poem, appropriately, trails off into incoherent decay.