

The Wanderer

"The Wanderer," anonymous, untitled, and elegiac, is preserved in the Exeter Book along with the group of poems usually known as the *Elegies*: "The Ruin," "The Seafarer," "The Husband's Message," and "The Wife's Lament." All deal with exile, solitariness, separation, loss—generally the loss of fellow warriors and protectors. Anglo-Saxon literature has little to say about the pangs of lovers, almost nothing that can be called love-poetry.

Theodoric probably Theodoric the Great, 454–526, king of the Ostrogoths, lord of Italy, who murdered Odoacer, the barbarian mercenary who had made himself Emperor of the West in 493; the reference is not clear. Others have suggested that Theodoric the Frank (Wolfdietrich), who also suffered exile and defeat, may be meant. The *Mæring* (l. 18) may be Theodoric.
Eormanric's the historical Eormanric, or Ermanric, king of the Ostrogoths, who died about 375, having made himself ruler from the Baltic to the Black Sea; later legend made him a cruel tyrant.

Goths the Ostrogoths, who originated in southern Russia and held Italy during the late fifth and early sixth century

eorl The word means either a nobleman, man of the upper class (as it does here), or a warrior: by this time its use was largely confined to poetry.

Heodenings' ruling family, descended from Heoden

Heorrenda Nothing is known of this bard, either. **land-right** estate granted to Deor as a reward for his poetry

No trace of love between man and woman is found in "The Wanderer," the finest of the elegiac lyrics. Its poignancy, its desolate chill, the atmosphere of physical and mental suffering it conveys, spring from the loss of the lord, protector of and provider for his household, from the loss of companions-at-arms, of the joys of feasting, drinking, of song and story and boast in the mead-hall, from the transitoriness of what is glorious and desirable in this world. The lord's death is the greatest of tragedies: it casts a man, old and unprotected when he most needs protection, on a hostile world, where all is perpetual winter.

The poem is a difficult one. Its language presents many problems, and the exact connotations that the poet intends us to catch are elusive. In genre it is an elegiac *consolatio*, written by a Christian poet who had some familiarity with Latin literature, as well as being steeped in the traditions of the Anglo-Saxon poetic craft. For some, the poem is an allegory: the exile it portrays is the spiritual exile from God of the Christian, while he is still in the world—so that the exile's journey is a kind of *Pilgrim's Progress*, by sea and not by land, the sea being the chosen road of the early Germanic peoples. The difficulty about this view is that such a specifically Christian allegory is not found elsewhere in Anglo-Saxon poetry, except in the set forms of the *Bestiary* or *The Phoenix*, both of which are, significantly, translations. The poem is perhaps best read as a moralization on the theme of the vanity of worldly things and worldly joy.

The Wanderer's opening statement of his faith that, after all the weariness and bitter cold of his life on earth, he will at last find comfort (ll. 1–7), is taken up again to round off the poem (ll. 103 ff.). Between, he tells of the tribulations of the man who must seek a new lord and new comrades, and the desolation he endures when, frozen and weary upon a freezing sea, he falls asleep, to dream of the warmth and happiness of companionship and feasting, only to wake and find it all a dream (ll. 8–53). Then, in the second section of the poem, he turns to meditate on his experience, to apply its lessons. Some have assumed that this second part of the poem is spoken by a third person, the sage who (l. 103) takes up the argument after the poet has provided the framework (ll. 6–7 and other occasional remarks) and the Wanderer has made his catalogue of wretchedness.

Of the poet who wrote "The Wanderer" we know nothing, not even an approximate date of birth or death. The most likely date of composition is the early tenth century.

The Wanderer°

Oft to the Wanderer, weary of exile,
Cometh God's pity, compassionate love,
Though woefully toiling on wintry seas
With churning oar in the icy wave,
Homeless and helpless he fled from Fate.°
Thus saith the Wanderer mindful of misery,
Grievous disasters, and death° of kin:

Wanderer "Wanderer" is the translator's choice for words that literally would be "man alone" (l. 1) and "earth-walker" (l. 6).

Fate The translation of *wyrd* as "Fate" deserves comment because of basic etymologic differences. "Fate" is from a Latin root connected with speaking: that which has been decreed

by the gods; *wyrd* is connected with the word for "become," and so literally means "what comes to pass" in the broadest context or, applied to men or to a single man, "the human lot," the state of change to which all are subject except God and the angels.
death by violence

'Oft when the day broke, oft at the dawning,
 Lonely and wretched I wailed my woe.
 10 No man is living, no comrade left,
 To whom I dare fully unlock my heart.
 I have learned truly the mark of a man
 Is keeping his counsel^o and locking his lips,
 Let him think what he will! For, woe of heart
 Withstandeth not Fate; a failing^o spirit
 Earneth no help. Men eager for honor
 Bury their sorrow deep in the breast.
 'So have I also, often in wretchedness
 20 Fettered my feelings, far from my kin,
 Homeless and hapless, since days of old,
 When the dark earth covered my dear lord's face,
 And I sailed away with sorrowful heart,
 Over wintry seas, seeking a gold-lord,^o
 If far or near lived one to befriend me
 With gift in the mead-hall and comfort for grief.
 'Who bears it, knows what a bitter companion,
 Shoulder to shoulder, sorrow can be,
 When friends are no more. His fortune is exile,
 Not gifts of fine gold; a heart that is frozen,
 30 Earth's winsomeness dead. And he dreams of the hall-men,
 The dealing of treasure, the days of his youth,
 When his lord bade welcome to wassail and feast.
 But gone is that gladness, and never again
 Shall come the loved counsel of comrade and king.
 'Even in slumber his sorrow assaileth,
 and, dreaming he claspeth his dear lord again,
 Head on knee, hand on knee, loyally laying,
 Pledging his liege^o as in days long past.
 Then from his slumber he starts lonely-hearted,
 40 Beholding gray stretches of tossing sea,
 Sea-birds bathing, with wings outspread,
 While hailstorms darken, and driving snow.
 Bitterer then is the bane of his wretchedness,
 The longing for loved one: his grief is renewed.
 The forms of his kinsmen take shape in the silence;
 In rapture he greets them; in gladness he scans
 Old comrades remembered. But they melt into air
 With no word of greeting to gladden his heart.
 Then again surges his sorrow upon him;
 50 And grimly he spurs his weary soul

keeping . . . counsel According to Tacitus, in his *Germania*, the Germanic peoples held that "a woman may decently express her grief in public; a man should nurse his in his heart." failing Another translation is "fierce," to make a contrasting pair—i.e. neither sorrow nor anger

will avail—rather than a repetitive pair. gold-lord a generous giver of gold and gifts, who would take him into his household Head . . . liege kneeling before the lord and making his profession of allegiance

104
 9c
 Once more to the toil of the tossing sea.
 'No wonder^o therefore, in all the world,
 If a shadow darkens upon my spirit
 When I reflect on the fates of men—
 How one by one proud warriors vanish
 From the halls that knew them, and day by day
 All this earth ages and droops unto death.
 No man may know wisdom till many a winter
 Has been his portion. A wise man is patient,
 60 Not swift to anger, nor hasty of speech,
 Neither too weak,^o nor too reckless, in war,
 Neither fearful nor fain,^o nor too wishful of wealth,
 Nor too eager in vow^o— ere he know the event.
 A brave man must bide when he speaketh his boast
 Until he know surely the goal of his spirit.
 'A wise man will ponder how dread is that doom
 When all this world's wealth shall be scattered and waste
 As now, over all, through the regions of earth,
 Walls stand rime-covered and swept by the winds.
 70 The battlements crumble, the wine-halls decay;
 Joyless and silent the heroes are sleeping
 Where the proud host fell by the wall they defended.
 Some battle launched on their long, last journey;
 One a bird^o bore o'er the billowing sea
 One the gray wolf^o slew; one a grieving eorl^o
 Sadly gave to the grave's embrace.
 The Warden of men hath wasted this world
 Till the sound of music and revel is stilled,
 And these giant-built structures^o stand empty of life.
 80 'He who shall muse on these mouldering ruins,
 And deeply ponder this darkling life,
 Must brood on old legends of battle and bloodshed,
 And heavy the mood that troubles his heart:
 'Where now is the warrior?^o Where is the war horse?
 Bestowal of treasure, and sharing of feast?
 Alas! the bright ale-cup, the byrny-clad warrior,
 The prince in his splendor^o—those days are long sped
 In the night of the past, as if they never had been!'

No wonder Some scholars see a break here, with a second speaker, not the Wanderer but the sage or wise man of l. 103, taking up the tale. A case can be made for this reading of the poem, but it is not necessary to make the division.

weak unreliable
 fain probably fawning, servile
 vow boastful promise
 bird No completely convincing explanation has yet been offered of the bird; perhaps it is the eagle or the raven, feeding on corpses, a common occurrence in the battle scenes of Anglo-Saxon literature.

wolf perhaps, again, feeding on the dead in battle
 eorl warrior
 giant-built structures usually taken to be Roman ruins, buildings of the great men of far-off times
 Where . . . warrior This brief *ubi sunt* lament, a further variation on the theme of transitoriness, on which the poem turns, is an echo of Latin homiletic and other works, applied to the things that the warrior prizes most.
 splendor i.e. as the center of the heroic community

And now remains only, for warriors' memorial,
 A wall wondrous high with serpent shapes° carved.
 Storms of ash-spears° have smitten the eorls,
 Carnage of weapon, and conquering Fate.
 'Storms now batter these ramparts of stone;
 Blowing snow and the blast of winter
 Enfold the earth; night-shadows fall
 Darkly lowering, from the north driving
 Raging hail in wrath upon men.
 Wretchedness fills the realm of earth,
 And Fate's decrees transform the world.
 Here wealth is fleeting, friends are fleeting,
 Man is fleeting, maid is fleeting;
 All the foundation of earth shall fail!
 Thus spake the sage in solitude pondering.
 Good man is he who guardeth his faith.
 He must never too quickly unburden his breast
 Of its sorrow, but eagerly strive for redress;
 And happy the man who seeketh for mercy
 From his heavenly Father, our Fortress° and Strength.

? 10th century

The Battle of Maldon

This poem must have been written not long after the battle itself, which took place in 991. In this year, the terse prose narrative of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* tells us, the Danes descended on the southeast coast of England. They came "with ninety-three ships to Folkestone, plundered the neighborhood and sailed on to Sandwich, whence they went to Ipswich, overran the whole countryside, and then proceeded to Maldon. Ealdorman Byrhtnoth came against them with the *fyrð* (the home levies) and fought them, but they killed the Ealdorman there and had possession of the battlefield . . ." Another version gives the information that "in this year it was decided for the first time to pay tribute to the Danes, because of the great terror they spread along the coast." This first time the amount was 10,000 pounds in gold and silver, but it was more later.

The annalists' bare little paragraphs set down the dismal facts, telling us nothing about the Battle of Maldon itself and next to nothing about the English leader, Byrhtnoth, except that he was a great nobleman. Nothing is said of how his noble qualities showed in the battle. Humiliation fills the scene, obliterating or crowding out everything else.

There had been for some years past plenty to be ashamed of. Scandinavian raiders had first attacked England in the late eighth century, and the contest between them

serpent shapes No architecture survives which would answer to this description; the nearest approaches are in Celtic minor art, the interlace patterns of Anglo-Saxon cross-shafts, metal work such as the Sutton Hoo buckle, or the Fetter-Lane sword pommel, all of which are on a much smaller scale.

ash-spears *æsc*, from the wood of which the shaft was made, one of the two normal names for a spear
Fortress See Proverbs 18:10, Psalms 17:2 for the notion of God as a fortress; Luther's *feste Burg* is a later example.

and the English had not finally been settled in England's favor until the early years of the tenth century, in spite of King Alfred's considerable victories. Since the Battle of Brunanburh in 937, there had been peace. Within a couple of years of the accession of King Ethelred II, the Unready (noble-counsel-no-counsel would be a way to render the Anglo-Saxon pun in his name and nickname), who reigned ignominiously from 978 to 1016, Danish raiders had begun again to harry the English coasts. They continued to do so throughout Ethelred's reign: countermeasures were sporadic, ill-organized, and unsuccessful. Treachery and betrayal were common among the nobility who ought to have been leading the resistance, and the payments by which the raiders were bought off became, later in Ethelred's reign, an annual and growing imposition (the tax was known as Danegeld). At Ethelred's death in 1016, a Dane, Canute, was finally crowned king of England.

Histories of Ethelred's reign chronicle warfare, misery, and defeat. Beside their grim story and spare language, the poem's depictions of Byrhtnoth's heroic qualities in stately and formal diction stand in marked contrast. The tale of his final battle emphasizes both the courage of other resistances and the cowardice of capitulations.

The poet's hero, Byrhtnoth, was at this time a man well over sixty, white-haired but still strikingly handsome, of giant height and strength. From a family of great landowners near Cambridge, he had himself been made (in 956) *ealdorman* ("earl" would be a good modern equivalent) of the East Saxons (Essex), that is to say, a kind of sub-king, the king's deputy in all the functions of government. He was a man of great power in his district, high in the king's favor, a great respecter and patron of monastic foundations, as well as a great scourge of the Danes. Byrhtnoth's legend was still alive in the twelfth century, when most others had been forgotten. The poet's celebration of the Christian Earl's fruitless courage against the pagan raiders, glorifying the heroic ideal, with contempt—not less strongly felt for being formally expressed—for cowardice and breaking of allegiance, must have contributed substantially to the legend.

The poem, as we have it, lacks a beginning and an end; both were already missing when the poem perished in the fire of 1731 that damaged the manuscript of *Beowulf*. We have the text only from a transcript which had fortunately been made. It is probable that the fragment preserved is, in fact, almost the whole of the work and that the poet intended to plunge us immediately into the middle of the action—bringing us, as in so much oral poetry, quickly to the heart of its significance. We, like the original audience, are expected to know something of the events previous to the mutual and ceremonial tauntings of the two sides that precede the battle itself.

The Danish raiders had sailed up the estuary of the River Blackwater and established a base on Northey Island from which they could set out, by land or sea, in search of fresh plunder. The arm of the river that lay between them and the mainland was good protection from attack by land, but it had the disadvantage of being navigable only in a narrow channel at its center, so that ships could not be used to help them make raids further inland. Their only way across was by a ford, the *brycg*, with a causeway at water level, and this *brycg* was also the only means by which the English force could arrive at a hand-to-hand battle with the Vikings. At the landward end of the causeway the English force was stationed. In this position of stalemate, one side had to give, if there was to be any contest. Since it was essential to the English that the issue be decided, Byrhtnoth withdrew, placing his men to best tactical advantage at the head of a slope—and lost the battle (see map, Fig. 3).

Byrhtnoth had had little choice, but we should not assume that tactical considerations