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CHRISTINE FELL

Perceptions of transience

They say the Lion and the Lizard keep
The Courts where Jamshyd gloried and drank deep.
Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam

Preoccupation with transience is not found solely within Old English elegiac poetry, though students of the genre may be forgiven for gaining that impression. There can be no major literature of the world that does not number among its themes wonder at the demise of earlier civilizations and regret for the brevity of human life and human joy. In a literature such as that of the Anglo-Saxons, marked by a variety of influences and traditions, it is hard to attribute with certainty all manifestations of the transience motif. Earlier scholars drew our attention to parallels in other Germanic medieval literatures, notably in the prose and poetry of Scandinavia written down in Iceland. Old Icelandic poetry of the type called 'eddic' has obvious similarities with Old English in style, vocabulary and subject matter. Possible influence on Old English elegy from Celtic lament has also been explored. Recently scholarship has focused more on the Christian Latin background to Anglo-Saxon thought, and shown how many apparently native wood-notes wild are in fact straight translation from theological sources.

The Old English poems traditionally called 'elegiac' are all found in one manuscript, the late tenth-century Exeter Book. It is a disturbing thought that had that particular codex been lost or destroyed we should have had scarcely any evidence of this genre in Anglo-Saxon vernacular poetry. There would still be the 'elegiac' passages in poems of epic dimensions such as *Beowulf* and *Elene* as well as a considerable corpus of Latin poetry by seventh- and eighth-century Anglo-Saxons. Also the transience motif surfaces, of course, in other types of poem, not to mention appearing frequently in homiletic prose. But the vernacular 'elegiac' poems, so called because no other covering adjective has yet been found for them, are a group with little in common except a preoccupation with loss, suffering and mortality. These poems include *The Seafarer, The Wanderer, The Wife's Lament, The Husband's Message, The Ruin, Deor, Wulf and Eadwacer* and *The Exile's Prayer* (sometimes called *Resignation*) – all stuck with these dreary titles imposed on them by early editors with more sense than sensibility. They are without titles of any kind in the manuscript.

There are practical difficulties in considering these poems as a group. For one thing they are not grouped in the manuscript. There is little to tell from the layout of the poems quite where one ends and another begins. Sometimes the change of subject matter is clear enough. But the scribe uses ornate initials when introducing sections of poems as well as new poems, and certainly in the case of the consecutive pieces *Riddle 60* and *The Husband's Message* it is not determinable whether we have two parts of one poem or two distinct poems with an overlap of subject matter. A more fundamental problem is that, though we can with precision date the manuscript, there are no linguistic tests that enable us to date the actual composition of the poems. The reading of them as a group is a matter of convenience determined by their similarities of tone and theme.

The Latin word from which 'transient' derives implied something that is passing, and the image therefore is one of a journey. The word, however, that the Anglo-Saxons use most often for the temporary nature of things of this world is *læne*, 'lent' or 'on loan', contrasted mostly with the *ece* 'eternal' nature of things of the next. 'Lent' and 'eternal' are not, for the modern reader, such a natural pair of opposites, and it is worth examining why they seemed so to the Anglo-Saxon mind. King Alfred provides the clearest answer:

> Ac se þe me lærde . . . se mæg gedon þæt ic softor eardian (mæge) ægðer ge on þisum *lænan* stoclife be þis wæge ða while þe ic on þisse weorulde beo, ge eac on þam *ecan* hame . . . Nis it nan wundor þeah man swilc ontimber gewirce, and eac on þa(re) lade and eac on þære bytlinge; ac ælcne man lyst, siððan he ænig cotlyf on his hlafordes *læne* myd his fultume getimbred hæfð, þæt he hine mote hwilum þar-on gerestan, and huntigan, and fuglian, and fiscian, and his on gehwilce wisan to þere *lænan* tilian, ægþær ge on se ge on lande, oð þone fyrst þe he *bocland* and *æce* yrfe þurh his hlafordes miltse geearnige. swa gedo se weliga gifola, se ðe egðer wilt ge þissa *lænena* stoclife ge þara *ecena* hama.[1]

> But the one who taught me . . . may bring it about that I live more comfortably both in this temporary place on the road while I occupy this world, and also in that eternal home . . . It is no surprise that we work hard with such materials both in transporting them and building with them: it pleases everyone who has built a home, as his lord's tenant and with his help, to be there sometimes, and to hunt and hawk and fish and in every way to cultivate his rented property, sea and soil, until the time that he may acquire, through his lord's generosity, bookland and a permanent heritage: the rich benefactor can do this, since he has under his control temporary houses and eternal homes.

King Alfred, born teacher that he is, is using the terms *bocland*, land granted by written charter as an inheritance in perpetuity, and *lænland*, land granted for the duration of one or more lifetimes, as images for eternal life and mortal life. He could scarcely have used such images unless he were confident that

they would be instantly understood, and it is arguable that it was precisely this practical distinction between two forms of land tenure that gave rise to the regular use of *læne* in poetic and homiletic antithesis to *ece*. Earth is *lænland*, heaven is *bocland*, the country guaranteed by no less a charter than the Gospels. In Modern English, Gospel and charter are not interchangeable words, but in Old English *boc* could be used equally for either. The Gospels are *feower Cristes bec* 'the four books of Christ', but *boc* also regularly glosses Latin *cartula* 'charter'.

John Mitchell Kemble pointed out as early as 1849 the link between the concepts *lænland* and *læne*. In a discussion of *lænland* he adds the footnote:

> The transitory possessions of this life were often so described, in reference to the Almighty: 'ða æhta ðe him God alæned hæfð'.[2]

The quotation is from the tenth-century will of Æthelric, who 'grants' to his widow 'those possessions which God has lent him' – though we may note that he 'grants' them for her lifetime only. Similarly, in the poem *Genesis*, what Adam forfeits is (consecutively) *læn godes, ælmihtiges gife* and *heofonrices geweald* 'the loan of God, the gift of the Almighty, possession of the kingdom of heaven'. The last of these is transient in the sense that the right of access to it may be restricted or conditional. And clearly even Paradise was *lænland*.

It is this kind of background that allows us to make sense of the distinctions between *læne* and *ece* in a poem such as *The Seafarer*. The poet draws a careful distinction between life on earth (*læne*), life after death (*ece*), and the voyage or voyages of his persona which represent rejection of all secular pleasures and values of the one in search for the other. In savage paradox *lif on londe* 'life on land/life on earth' is not merely *læne* but *deade* 'dead'. The poet then tells us of his disbelief in the permanence of any *eorðwelan*, and it is clear from the context that 'the riches of earth' are a synonym for life itself. Three words which normally denote earthly well-being are wrenched into use for the eternal: *ecan lifes blæd / dream mid dugeþum* 'the splendour of eternal life, joy among heroes' (?'joy in the courts'). Seven lines later the same words reappear in their normal role to underline the abnormality of their use earlier:

> Gedroren is þeos duguð eal, dreamas sind gewitene ...
> Blæd is gehnæged (86–8)

> All these heroes have gone, joys departed ... Splendour declined.

The demonstrative here and in the intervening lines is stressed as a reminder to the reader of the distinction between transient and eternal *dream, duguð* and *blæd*.

The things that are *læne* are divisible into three: life itself, property and happiness. The first is a single entity, the other two composite. The poet of *The Wanderer* says:

> Her bið feoh læne, her bið freond læne,
> her bið mon læne, her bið mæg læne (108–9)

which, summarized rather than translated, tells us that property, friend, man and kinsman are all 'on loan' or transient. The third, *mon*, probably refers to self, the implication being that one's own life is merely lent to one, while the necessarily impermanent nature of friendship and kinship ties is one theme of *The Wanderer* throughout. Since people may outlive all those they love, the only rational course of action is to transfer their affections to the undying, to seek *frofre to Fæder on heofonum* 'consolation from the heavenly Father'. It is customary to cite in this context the parallel text from the Old Icelandic eddic poem *Hávamál*, which offers the same wisdom in a pagan and secular context:

> Deyr fé,
> deyja frændr,
> deyr sjálfr it sama.[3]

It is somewhat simpler: 'cattle die, kin die, one's self dies', followed by the reminder that the one thing that does not die is one's reputation. It contrasts transient with permanent but both are human-centred, reputation being in the hands of the living. The Old English and Old Icelandic texts are linked by thought, vocabulary and alliteration and the motif may come from common Germanic stock, but in spite of superficial similarities there is a significant difference. The message of *The Wanderer* is God-centred, not only in the poem as a whole but also in this important use of the Christian-oriented concept *læne* where *Hávamál* has the straightforward verb *deyja* 'to die'. On the other hand, in *The Seafarer* there is a passage which blends, in careful contrivance, human-centred and God-centred posthumous benefits:

> Forþon þæt bið eorla gehwam æftercweþendra
> lof lifgendra lastworda betst,
> þæt he gewyrce, ær he on weg scyle,
> fremum on foldan wið feonda niþ,
> deorum dædum deofle togeanes,
> þæt hine ælda bearn æfter hergen,
> ond his lof siþþan lifge mid englum (72–8)

Therefore for every man the praise of the living, of those speaking afterwards, is the best of epitaphs, in that he should bring it about before dying, by actions on earth against the hostility of enemies, by valiant deeds against the devil, that the

children of men should afterwards praise him and his glory live then with the angels.

The praise of the living clearly includes heavenly and earthly voices. The two lines which speak of actions on earth carefully balance human activity against human foe with spiritual battle against the infernal. The following two lines, equally impartially, balance rewards in reputation among the children of men and among angels. Anthropologists who tell us of shame cultures and guilt cultures might define the obsession with reputation among one's fellow men as exemplifying the former, reliance on the judgement of God rather than one's peers as the latter. For the Anglo-Saxons, having inherited one set of values through secular Germanic thought and acquired another through Christian Latin teaching, the one does not preclude the other. Milton, some centuries later, had a similar experience. He also put the two side by side when he called the urge for earthly fame the 'last infirmity of noble mind' and tried instead to concentrate only on 'the perfect witness of all-judging Jove'. The poet of *The Seafarer*, in combining two traditions, the heroic – if we may so define it, preoccupation with survival of honour after loss of life – and the Christian hope for security of tenure in heaven, is perceiving transience on two levels, or, at any rate, as contrasted with two types of permanence. The fighters in the tenth-century poem *The Battle of Maldon* by contrast, though Christian enough to call the Vikings 'heathens', express their thoughts mainly in terms of the human wavelength – what people will say about them. Their attitude to the nature of immortality has some justification in that a millennium later we are still reading the poem and accepting the poet's judgements on individual heroes and cowards, those who followed their leader's exhortation to achieve fame, *dom gefeohtan*, by fighting the enemy, who preferred death in battle to the long-lasting shame of riding home *hlafordleas* 'lordless', and those on the other hand who saved their lives at the expense of their name. The cheerful secular courage of the former is certainly closer to the teaching of *Hávamál* (as would doubtless have been that of their opponents) than of *The Wanderer*.

What we may loosely call the Germanic or heroic or secular perception of immortality in this period is the survival of personal reputation. It is narrowed to the individual. But Anglo-Saxon poets were demonstrably well-read in a range of literatures and they have a wider perspective. Elegiac poets could find plenty to muse on in the Bible alone, whether their thoughts on transience entailed not putting trust in treasures of earth 'where moth and rust doth corrupt', or comparing the life of man to the briefly blossoming flowers of the field. Some scholars have seen in certain elegiac poems direct borrowing from parts of the Bible. But our earliest known Anglo-Saxon poets were educated in

classical as well as biblical traditions and it is clear that they enjoyed the intellectual challenge and the emotional and cultural riches which their reading brought them. We know that Bede could compose poetry in the vernacular but it was not a skill which he himself valued and apart from his *Death-Song*, preserved out of reverence for Bede rather than for composition in a barbarian dialect, none survives. His hymns and epitaphs in Latin do, as does his *De arte metrica*. Boniface and his circle, especially Lull and some of his contemporaries, were eager in the practice and understanding of Latin metres. Aldhelm and Alcuin probably felt undressed without a quill in their hands. But among these it is Alcuin whose poems deal most directly and gracefully with the theme of mortality, and who seems closest to the lyric and elegiac poems of late antiquity. In his prose letters Alcuin advises the love of eternal not perishable wealth: *Redemptio uiri proprie diuitie* and *amemus eterna et non peritura* 'redemption is man's true wealth' and 'let us love the eternal not the transient'.[4] Elsewhere he reminds his correspondents that we are stewards not owners of earthly goods, thoughts which can easily be traced back to patristic theology and exposition.

For the influences on Alcuin's poetry we do not need to look far. He himself tells us what manuscripts were in York's ecclesiastical library in the eighth century and this must be considered a list of his own reading. He names several poets, one of them being the sixth-century poet Venantius Fortunatus, for whom Alcuin's own courteous epigram shows particular affection. But there also were Virgil, Arator and Boethius, to name obvious influences. And of course the library, in addition to the works of poets and philosophers, held also the tomes of the great theologians with their sights always on eternity and their rejection of the world, the flesh and the devil.

Venantius, a Christian, was as happy to chant Virgil to himself for recreation as the psalms. Other early Christian Latin poets could not rid their minds of the words and cadences of their pagan predecessors however much their Christian rationality urged them to do so. The Anglo-Saxons similarly had a poetic and cultural inheritance which did not disappear because of Christian-educated literary sensibilities. But whether we are talking about poets writing in Latin or the vernaculars, in England of the eighth century onwards or Europe in the sixth, one link between them is the anguished affection with which a Christian poet regards those lovely things of the world that the preacher tells him to despise. Isidore is often cited as the source of the so-called *ubi sunt* passages in Old English elegy. Certainly Isidore was known to the Anglo-Saxons and certainly his heavyweight *Dic ubi sunt reges? ubi principes? ubi imperatores?* 'where are the kings, the chieftains, the emperors?' etc. etc. can be seen as one source for *The Seafarer*'s

nearon nu cyningas ne caseras
ne goldgiefan swylce iu wæron (82–3)

There are now no kings nor caesars, nor gold-givers such as there were.

But the poet goes on to recall their splendour with a sense of love and loss, which is far closer to the grieving tone of Venantius than the pompous one of Isidore.

Seventh-century English scholars such as Bede and Aldhelm were well known to later generations of Anglo-Saxons, eighth-century writers perhaps less so. I do not know of any Old English translation of Alcuin's poetry, but still it is barely imaginable that it was unknown and without influence. In the elegiac vein his greatest tour de force is his lament over the Viking attack on Lindisfarne. It is his letters home rather than his poem on this event which are usually quoted by historians, but the poem *De clade Lindisfarnensis monasterii* deserves attention. It can be compared with Venantius's *De excidio Thoringiae* which Alcuin undoubtedly knew. Both poems are descriptions of destruction and as such are bound to have themes in common, but Alcuin is not using Venantius's poem as a model and there are no close verbal echoes. Venantius looks to Troy for comparison. Alcuin looks at Babylon, Rome and Jerusalem. Many of the themes that we find later in Old English vernacular poetry are signalled in Alcuin. The notion that since Adam's fall man is an exile on earth is the opening to Alcuin's poem, a theme we meet frequently in the literature of the period, and which may help our reading of *The Seafarer*. Alcuin begins:

Postquam primus homo paradisi liquerat hortos
Et miseras terras exul adibat inops . . . (1–2)

Since first man left the gardens of Paradise and, a destitute exile, entered desolate lands . . .

The persona of *The Seafarer* is, similarly, always in exile, turning his back on loved but transient luxuries, hoping

þæt ic feor heonan
elþeodigra eard gesece (37–8)

that I, far from here, may search for the home of exiles.

Elþeodigra eard means literally 'land of foreigners', but in the context must refer to those who are foreigners on earth, citizens (at any rate *in spe*) of heaven. The poet then claims that there is no one living who 'will not always have sorrow because of his sea-journey', a statement that is manifestly nonsensical on a literal level and can only apply to the journey of the exile to his true home.

Alcuin continues with what might be termed the commonplaces of lament, that nothing earthly remains eternal, that no joy lasts. But Alcuin's poem is not commonplace. His grief for Rome is as poignant as his grief for Lindisfarne:

> Roma, caput mundi, mundi decus, aurea Roma,
> Nunc remanet tantum saeva ruina tibi (37–8)
>
> Rome, capital of the world, glory of the world, golden Rome, now is left of you only a wild ruin.

Having then sighed over Jerusalem he draws the expected but none the less aching conclusion:

> Sic fugit omne decus, hominis quod dextera fecit,
> Gloria seclorum sic velut umbra volat (55–6)
>
> So flies all wonder that man's hands have made, glory of ages flees like a shadow.

Venantius and Alcuin grieve over known places, even if not all the victims of attack and slaughter can be identified. But one curious feature of Old English elegiac poetry is that most of it mentions neither personal nor place-names. (*Deor* is an exception.) These vernacular poems give the reader no clues, or meagre ones at best, to help define the context that produced them. *The Ruin* is unique among them in having no persona, no 'I' whose anonymous experiences are presented. It is a poem about a place not a person, and we have no voice between us and the poet's direct observation. Even so the absence of firm identification of this place has caused much controversy. This used to be about whether the ruin was the Roman city of Bath or some other Roman site. Now it is about whether we are contemplating an actual place or an allegorical one, Bath, as one critic has asked, or Babylon? In the following discussion I assume the actual. It is a short poem, a mere fifty lines, and since the Exeter Book is damaged at this point we do not even have a complete text. But more clearly than any other of the elegies it focuses on the transient by focusing on the past, and especially the contrast between past and present.

In the opening lines we have conflicting tenses and responses. The masonry is both wonderful and decaying. Events have shattered it but it is still *enta geweorc* 'the work of giants'. The roof is picked out as a *scurbeorg* 'protection against storms' but that it is failing in its protective function is signalled by the accompanying adjective *sceard* 'gaping'. The poet moves from contemplation of the ruin to contemplation of the builders, held in the grip of earth for a hundred generations. But the walls themselves, lichen-covered, have known kingdom after kingdom.

We are much accustomed to see in Anglo-Saxon literature the influence of other literatures. But we should also take into account visual reminders of mortality. Anglo-Saxons mostly built in timber, and even when they built in stone they did not rival Roman architecture. How fully any Roman site was occupied in the days of early Anglo-Saxon settlement is still under dispute by Romano-British historians, but even so there must have been a fantastic number of ghost-towns or ghost-villas with no neat National Trust lawns surrounding them. Those of us who saw the Anglo-Saxon skeletons buried among the fallen pillars of Roman York under the present Minster were given a sharpened awareness of how the *enta geweorc* was perceived. But buildings are silent witnesses except for occasional memorial inscriptions or grafitti, and the poet of *The Ruin* can give no names to builders, rulers or citizens. He does, however, visualize these magnificent and nameless inhabitants:

> þær iu beorn monig
> glædmod and goldbeorht gleoma gefrætwed,
> wlonc ond wingal wighyrstum scan;
> seah on sinc, on sylfor, on searogimmas,
> on ead, on æht, on eorcanstan,
> on þas beorhtan burg bradan rices (32–7)

> where once many a man bright in mood, bright with gold, glittering, proud, happy from wine-drinking, shone in his armour; he looked on treasure, on silver, on jewellery, on wealth, on property, on pearls, on this bright stronghold of the broad kingdom.

It is impossible in translation to get all the nuances of this description, but the general tenor is clear enough. The poet tries to parallel the evident splendour of the former city with equal imagined splendour of life within it. And in evoking past splendour he necessarily evokes too the passing of time between his vision and present reality.

As *The Ruin* is presented in the only surviving text there is no overt Christian comment. We are not formally invited to look at the transient in the light of the eternal. The 'ruined hall topos' may have been a commonplace, but this particular poet is as much impressed by achievement as musing on mortality and it is the tension between these two responses that differentiates *The Ruin* from either the lament of Venantius Fortunatus over the collapsed Thuringian roofs and palaces or that of Alcuin over Lindisfarne's altar. The impersonal quality of the poem must lie in the fact that as a traveller in an antique land the poet looks on an alien civilization. When we meet the 'ruined hall topos' in *Beowulf* and *The Wanderer*, it is drawn into the context of Germanic tribal loss.

The poet of *The Wanderer* may, like the poet of *The Ruin*, be contemplating Roman architecture. The *weal wundrum heah wyrmlicum fah*, 'a

marvellous high wall decorated with serpent shapes', has certainly suggested Roman stone bas-relief to one editor. But ruins, for this poet, only serve to call up thoughts of death. His tenses move between past and implied future:

> Ongietan sceal gleaw hæle hu gæstlic bið,
> þonne ealre þisse worulde wela weste stondeð (73–4)

The wise man naturally perceives how ghostly it will be when all the rich places of this world lie deserted.

He looks at the buildings, not as the other poet did in order to imagine the brilliance of life within them, but to catalogue modes of death:

> sumne se hara wulf
> deaðe gedælde, sumne dreorighleor
> in eorðscræfe eorl gehydde (82–4)

The grey wolf tore one apart as he died; another by a grieving man was hidden in a hole in the ground.

This is a universal, not a specific, description of death in battle. (From the Anglo-Saxon viewpoint the lurking wolf is de rigueur.) But the poet moves on to specify loss in terms which would naturally suggest to the Anglo-Saxon audience their own culture. When he asks where is the treasure-giver or where are the joys of the hall he is not inviting them to take a historical perspective as the poet of *The Ruin* did. He uses the remnants of a Roman past to focus on transience and mortality then shifts to emotive rhetoric evoking the same themes within a local context. His purpose is to demonstrate the inadequacy of the earthly in the light of the eternal. In this he is much closer to Alcuin than the poet of *The Ruin*. Alcuin focused on the eternal by describing the destruction of those named cities that had been the pride of the known world. The vernacular poet names nothing, but the effect is there:

> Yðde swa þisne eardgeard ælda scyppend
> oþþæt burgwara breahtma lease
> eald enta geweorc idlu stodon (85–7)

So the Creator of men destroyed this place until, empty of sounds and citizens, the old works of the giants stood desolate.

With the same technique of oxymoron whereby the poet of *The Ruin* focused on the non-roofly quality of the roofs, so this poet deliberately calls God *scyppend* in the moment of describing his destructive powers.

Turning to the same *topos* in *Beowulf* we find it treated differently yet again. There are two passages commonly called 'elegiac'. In the shorter one the relevant lines end an account of a man mourning his son's death. They are

not entirely appropriate to the restricted context, suggesting loss on a tribal rather than an individual scale. The poet is already anticipating the destruction of the Geats, which, he implies, will follow his hero's death:

> Gesyhð sorhcearig on his suna bure
> winsele westne, windge reste
> reote berofene. Ridend swefað,
> hæleð in hoðman; nis þær hearpan sweg,
> gomen in geardum, swylce ðær iu wæron (2455–9)

He looks, bitterly sorrowful, on his son's home, the empty wine-hall, the wind-swept resting-place robbed of delight. The riders sleep, the young men in their graves; there is no music of the harp, no pleasure in the courts such as used to be.

This is a rhetorical pattern we find often enough in Old English poetry, description by negatives. Present misery is defined as absence of the joys of the hall. Desolation is evoked by contrast. It is as far as it can be from the triumphant note of *The Ruin* even though both poets are ostensibly engaged in the same activity – contemplating deserted buildings and contrasting their present with their past.

The other elegiac passage in *Beowulf* has, with the usual imaginative brilliance of editors, been named 'The lay of the last survivor'. The action that calls out the 'ruined hall topos' is the burial of a treasure hoard by one who believes himself to be the last of his tribe. General desolation is therefore more appropriate in this context. The poet moves from the specific thoughts associated with the treasure to the empty hall, from the unpolished cups and unwielded swords to,

> Næs hearpan wyn,
> gomen gleobeames, ne god hafoc
> geond sæl swingeð, ne se swifta mearh
> burhstede beateð (2262–5)

There was no joy of the harp, pleasure of music, no good hawk winging through the hall, no swift horse tramping the courtyard.

The similarity with the earlier quotation is obvious, and, equally obviously, there is not in either passage any immediate suggestion of eternal benefit to be set against mortal loss. The poet of *The Wanderer* and Alcuin are overt in their antitheses. For Alcuin the raid on Lindisfarne prompted the exhortation:

> Quapropter potius caelestia semper amemus
> Et mansura polo, quam peritura solo (119–20)

Therefore let us always love heavenly and abiding things rather than the dying ones of earth.

The persona of *The Wanderer* similarly found no reason, in pondering matters of this world, why his mind does not grow dark, and could only lighten it by looking towards heaven. But if these thoughts are in the *Beowulf*-poet's mind (as indeed many readers would claim) they are less transparent. This is, of course, reasonable in one sense in that, however Christian the poet, his speakers in both elegiac passages are sited in the pagan past. However, since he allows his pagan king Hrothgar to speak of God, the absence of religious consolation here may well be deliberate.

The poet of *Deor* has, among vernacular poets, possibly the most philosophical approach to the temporary nature of earthly experience, which is one reason why scholars have read into so short a poem the influence of Boethius. Like the *Beowulf*-poet he sets his thoughts within the context of the Germanic past, a past, for both poets, in which legend and history merge. The layout of *Deor* in the manuscript gives the effect of a stanzaic poem (as opposed to the continuous alliterative long line elsewhere). The scribe divides it into six sections, beginning each with an ornamental initial and ending each with the statement *þæs ofer eode þisses swa mæg* 'that came to an end, perhaps this will too'. As this moral suggests, what we have here – in contrast to all the poems we have considered so far – is a meditation on the transient nature of earthly unhappiness. The consolation which the poet offers is not that of eternal bliss, but the fact of transience itself. In the first five sections he specifies well-known people, alludes to their misfortunes (or those of others in connection with them) in at most six lines, then offers his bleakly rational comfort. Nothing here about an everlasting future of song and banqueting!

Again, in contrast to the *Beowulf*-poet's technique of evoking desolation by describing lost pleasures, the *Deor*-poet accumulates the vocabulary of suffering. In the first four lines he alludes to Welund's *wræc*, *earfoð*, *sorg*, *longað*, *wea* and *wintercealdu wræce*: 'persecution', 'hardship', 'sorrow', 'longing', 'misery' and 'winter-cold suffering'. He then takes two lines to describe the actions that caused these, imprisonment and deliberate crippling. His language would be opaque to the modern reader if we did not know enough of Welund's story from elsewhere to feel fairly confident that the reference to Welund's enemy placing him in 'supple sinew-bonds' refers to the cutting of his sinews as an act of mutilation. The poet expects us to know enough about all his characters to fill in background for ourselves (cf. above, pp. 91–2). This may have been a valid assumption for his original audience. It is not always so for us and perhaps we miss many of his subtleties. The general progression is, however, clear. After four sections on the varied sufferings of individuals the poet moves to the reign of Eormanric (Ermanaric) and in a fine compression of ideas shows us the effects of a tyrant's rule. The standard half-line of praise for a good ruler – *þæt wæs god cyning* 'he was a good king' – is rewritten for

the villain as *þæt wæs grim cyning*, the adjective 'savage' replacing 'good'. Instead of suitable ideas of government he had *wylfen geþoht* 'wolfish thought', the wolf, associated with outlawry, being the opposite of social order. Instead of inspiring proper loyalty in a society where the bond between lord and retainer was supreme,

Sæt secg monig sorgum gebunden,
wean on wenan, wyscte geneahhe
þæt þæs cynerices ofercumen wære (24–6)

many a man sat, bound by suffering, expecting sorrow: he often wished for the overthrow of that kingdom.

The poet has moved from perception of transience in relation to the individual to analysis of wider effects. He and we know of the final outcome of battles between Goths and Huns and it follows that those who endured the tyranny had their wishes eventually fulfilled. The 'ruined hall topos' might here be replaced by the 'vanished empire topos' except that this poet leaves much to the educated imagination.

In his final section the poet moves to an overtly Christian perspective. The unhappy man – *sorgcearig* – finds, like the persona of *The Wanderer*, that his mind grows dark under the contemplation of earthly grief:

sylfum þinceð
þæt sy endeleas earfoða dæl (29–30)

it seems to him that his share of hardships is endless.

Yet the poet denies this explicit statement by juxtaposing the words *endeleas* and *dæl*. The mere fact of something being a 'division' or 'share' implies that it is finite and contained, and – as he has already demonstrated – everyone's share of misery, however harsh or prolonged, passes eventually. He reminds his *sorgcearig* man that all fate and change are under the control of a wise God, the distributor of fortune and misfortune alike.

As a consolation it is still bleak. But the comfort of the message must be that suffering (as well as being transient) is not random, a comfort that can only help those whose trust in the wisdom of God is secure. It is possible that the poet, as well as assuming knowledge of Germanic history and legend, assumes in his readers a similar grasp of Boethian philosophy to that of recent interpreters of *Deor*. But it is also possible that it would have seemed to him a simple truism of Christian thought that in a world created by a wise God suffering must have a purpose, and those who endure know, like the martyrs, that they are part of the divine pattern. As Alcuin said in honour of Lindisfarne's dead:

Per gladios, mortes, pestes, per tela, per ignes,
Martyrio sancti regna beata petunt (223–4)

Through swords, deaths, plagues, through spears, through fires, the saints, in martyrdom, look for the blessed lands.

A passage in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, rhythmic enough in its antitheses to be sometimes printed as poetry, says of the martyrdom in AD 1011 of Ælfheah, archbishop of Canterbury,

Wæs ða ræpling se þe ær wæs Angelcynnes heafod ond Cristendomes. Þær man mihte þa geseon earmðe þær man ær geseah blisse on þære ærman byrig þanon us com ærest Cristendom ond blisse for Gode ond for worulde.[5]

He was then a prisoner, he who had been the head of England and of Christendom. There could be seen misery where once was seen joy in that sad city from which first came to us Christianity and joy in God and the world.

The writer of the *Chronicle*, a couple of hundred years later than Alcuin, still sees the ironic and subtle patterns in the alternation of earthly good and earthly ill and eventual eternal gain.

Finally, there are three 'elegiac' poems which deal with the transience of earthly happiness in the purely secular context of human relationships. They are *Wulf and Eadwacer, The Wife's Lament* and *The Husband's Message*. Though I treat these as secular, readers should be warned that other scholars have seen two of them as Christian allegories, and there are probably as many interpretations of *The Wife's Lament* as there are readers of it. Of all the poems discussed, *The Husband's Message* stands out as the only one with an apparently happy ending in human and earthly terms. The main protagonist, whether one calls him husband or lover, has been separated from the woman promised to him. Like the unhappy characters in *Deor* he has had his share of suffering. In *Deor* it is not always clear whether suffering ended only when life itself ended, or whether there was a recompense, a turn of Fortune's wheel, during life. It has been suggested that Welund's recompense was his revenge, that Beadohild's compensation for rape was to become mother of a hero. (Feminist critics might not see it that way.) But many of Eormanric's victims must have died before they could see their wishes fulfilled. We are told, however, that the protagonist of *The Husband's Message* has overcome suffering. The tone is jubilant. The reversal of fortune is largely attributed, in a somewhat sketchy plot, to his own efforts. We are given to understand that he was driven from home by feud, went into exile alone, but has in his new country established himself as a lord with all the good things that accompany such prosperity – gold, land, followers. His confidence does not

seem to be shaken by any reflections on the transience of such. But the reader needs to be reflective. The man looks with equal confidence to the woman's arrival, reminding her of the vows that bind them. But in telling her to let no one living hinder her from the journey, he alerts us to the possibility of hindrance and therefore failure. And though he does not thank the Almighty for his present achievements he recognizes, if his messenger reports him correctly, that their union is within god's gift:

> þonne inc geunne alwaldend god,
> <þæt git> ætsomne siþþan motan
> secgum ond gesiþum <sinc brytnian> (32–4)

Then Almighty God may grant to you both that the two of you together may share out treasure among men and comrades.

Without the background knowledge of Anglo-Saxon awareness of transience it would be easy to take this poem at face value. As it is, given a sentence which tells us that the man has all he wants if he may also obtain his bride, we inevitably respond to the conditional as a warning signal.

The Wife's Lament and *Wulf and Eadwacer* present the themes of loss, suffering and impermanence of human ties through a woman's voice. Both voices tell us of estrangement or separation from loved ones. Neither poem offers consolation in earthly or eternal terms. The implications of *The Wife's Lament* are that only death will end sorrow. She speaks of her wretchedness *in woruldrice* 'the earthly kingdom', tells us that,

> ic æfre ne mæg
> þære modceare minre gerestan,
> ne ealles þæs longaþes þe mec on þissum life begeat (39–41)

I can never rest from my sorrow, nor from all the longing that troubles me in this life.

Her final comment – that those are always unhappy, who endure longing for a loved one – would be equally appropriate to the woman in *Wulf and Eadwacer*. In its stoicism it has some affinities with *Deor*, but it lacks any perspective beyond the immediacy of suffering. What these poems have in common with the ones considered earlier is the focus on transience. What they lack is the theological or philosophical dimension.

The preoccupation with transience is not one which the twentieth century comprehends very readily. The average undergraduate meeting Anglo-Saxon intimations of mortality is probably anticipating something like another seventy years of life in this world before facing the next. But one recent excavator of an Anglo-Saxon cemetery estimates the life expectancy of the

Anglo-Saxon male as 32 years, of the female as 30.5 years. Recent statistics from a Kentish cemetery suggest a life expectancy into the late thirties, but demonstrate a peak mortality rate in the teens and early twenties. Infant mortality, less easy to demonstrate from the archaeological evidence, would be, inevitably, high. It is not surprising that Anglo-Saxon thinkers occupied themselves with meditations on that which might endure a little longer. They knew, with the poet of *The Seafarer*, that:

> adl oþþe yldo oþþe ecghete
> fægum fromweardum feorh oðþringeð (70–1)

disease or age or violence crush life from the doomed.

The poet of *The Fates of Men* has a more depressing list. People may die in the wolf's jaws, they may starve, be wrecked at sea, be killed by spear or sword in private quarrel or battle. They may fall from trees, be executed on the gallows or burned to death. The writers of Anglo-Saxon medical texts remind us of the appalling range of illness and accident that their contemporaries suffered. The students of excavated bones demonstrate the prevalence of arthritic complaints. For many their day-to-day existence must have been constant endurance of physical pain.

Yet physical suffering is not what the poems are about. The preoccupation is with emotional deprivation, the loss of those things which put joy into life, usually expressed in terms of human relationships. The poet of *The Dream of the Rood* waits with longing for heaven because

> Nah ic ricra feala
> freonda on foldan, ac hie forð heonon
> gewiton of worulde dreamum, sohton him wuldres cyning;
> lifiað nu on heofenum mid heahfædere (131–4)

I have scarcely any powerful friends on earth: they went from here, left the joys of this world, sought the king of glory. They live now in heaven with the high father.

The friends that he has lost have found new and imperishable relationships. It is no accident that the poet chooses the words 'king' and 'father' for God. The closest bonds in Anglo-Saxon society were the ties of lordship and kinship. One of the commonest compounds for a lord places equal stress on the lordship and friendship elements of the relationship, *winedryhten* 'friend-lord'. One of the commonest compounds for a comrade in the hall is similarly dual in its emphasis, *winemæg*' friend-kin'. When the poet tells us of his desire to join *Dryhtnes folc / geseted to symle* 'the people of the lord, sitting at the feast' it is clear that he visualizes heaven as a re-creation of the joys of the hall,

the reciprocal love between lord, friends and kin established in an enduring context. The persona of *The Wanderer*, having lost the joys of the hall, foolishly attempted to find them again on earth:

> sohte sele dreorig sinces bryttan,
> hwær ic feor oþþe neah findan meahte
> þone þe in meoduhealle min mine wisse
> oþþe mec freondleasne frefran wolde . . . (25–8)

> Desolate without a hall, I sought a giver of treasure, where I could find, near or far, one who in the mead hall would show love for me, or would comfort me, friendless.

By the end of the poem he too finds the only security in the eternal. It should come as no surprise that the vision of the eternal is the re-creation and continuation of what has seemed to be the best of earth.

For the poet Cynewulf this life was a flickering torch. The common stock of poetic vocabulary reiterates the ephemeral nature of human existence. The body is only a *flæschama*, a 'flesh-garment', to be laid aside. The mind or heart or spirit is treasure locked in a *bancofa*, a 'box of bone'. The image links the physical reality of the rib-cage with the idea of carved and ornamented artifacts like the whale-bone Franks Casket. Such boxes intended for the safe-keeping of secular or spiritual treasure, jewellery or relics, were, however beautiful, of less value than their contents. But the image is sometimes less of safe-keeping than of imprisonment, the idea of a bone cage or prison, from which the spirit will be released into freedom. Hope of eternity often comes across as a longing for just such release. The poet of *The Seafarer* anticipates his voyage to heaven in the following terms:

> For þon nu min hyge hweorfeð ofer hreþerlocan,
> min modsefa mid mereflode
> ofer hwæles eþel hweorfeð wide,
> eorþan sceatas, cymeð eft to me
> gifre ond grædig (58–62)

> And so my thought now passes beyond the locked place of my breast, my soul with the sea-tide travels far over the whale's homeland, the surfaces of earth: it comes back to me eager and ready.

Eager and ready, as we shortly see, for *Dryhtnes dreamas*, 'the joys of the Lord'.

Bede's story of a pagan Northumbrian for whom this life was comparable with the flight of a sparrow through a warm and lighted room has been rehearsed often enough (e.g. above, pp. 121 and 160). For him as for Bede

the moral was that in pagan terms the contrast with this warmth and comfort was darkness, winter and storm from which the sparrow (or, by implication, the human soul) came and to which it returned. The promise of Christianity was, at any rate for the righteous, of a life after death that surpassed in brilliance anything experienced on earth. For the Anglo-Saxons the hope of a heaven filled with everlasting joy, feasting and music must have been implicit in Christ's promise: *On mines Fæder huse synt manega eardungstowa … ic fare and wylle eow eardungstowe gearwian* – 'in my Father's house are many mansions. I go to prepare a place for you.'

NOTES

1. *King Alfred's Version of St Augustine's 'Soliloquies'*, ed. T. A. Carnicelli (Cambridge, MA, 1969), pp. 47–8 (italics mine).
2. J. M. Kemble, *The Saxons in England*, 2 vols. (London, 1849), I, 310, n. 3. The will of Æthelric is printed in *Anglo-Saxon Wills*, ed. and trans. D. Whitelock (Cambridge, 1930), pp. 42–3.
3. *Hávamál*, ed. D. A. H. Evans (London, 1986), p. 54; trans. W. H. Auden and P. B. Taylor, *Norse Poems* (London, 1981), p. 156.
4. From Alcuin's letter to Bishop Higbald and an unknown community (see above, p. 85, n. 4), printed in *Two Alcuin Letter-Books*, ed. C. Chase (Toronto, 1975), p. 52; trans. S. Allott, *Alcuin of York* (York, 1974), p. 37. Alcuin's poems are printed in Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Poetae Latini Aevi Carolini I (Berlin, 1881); *De clade Lindisfarnensis monasterii* is trans. M. Allen and D. Calder, in *Sources & Analogues of Old English Poetry: the Major Latin Texts in Translation* (Cambridge and Totawa, NJ, 1976), pp. 141–6.
5. *Two of the Saxon Chronicles Parallel*, ed. C. Plummer and J. Earle, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1892) I, 142; trans. D. Whitelock, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (London, 1961), p. 91.

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