

The Wanderer

The Wanderer is a memorable example of meditation in a lyrical vein, in which universal rules are generated from intense personal experience. Though the context is unequivocally Christian, the poem is striking for the intimate allusions it makes to the conduct and ethos of the secular 'heroic' world. These occur notably in the retrospective brooding of the persona of the 'wanderer' himself (that being the widely accepted rendering of the word *eardstapa* in line 6 – literally 'earth-stepper' or 'earth-hopper'), as he mourns separation from his treasure-giving lord, on whose knees he once ceremoniously laid hands and head, and from his boon companions of the mead-hall. It is (or was) a world of ritual, good companionship and human warmth, the memory of which is all the more compelling in contrast with a forlorn present of coldness and isolation.

The Wanderer is a frame poem, which begins and ends with lines of explicit Christian statement – first about the availability of God's mercy, even to the abject exile (1–5), and last about the rewards of faith (112–15). Within this outer frame is another one (6–7 and 11), in which brief 'stage directions' are given, introduced by the formula *swā cwæþ*, 'thus spoke' – in the first place, 'thus spoke the wanderer', and in the second, 'thus spoke the wise man' (*stottor*). Enclosed by this double frame is the long central section of the poem (8–110), which, in the simplest interpretation, may be seen as the monologue of the wanderer, in whose reflective voice the poet develops his theme. The monologue itself is structured, moving from personal despair to detached observation, and its integrity need not be affected by its closing lines (92–110), in which the wanderer rounds off his own ruminations by invoking the voice of a world-weary 'everyman', who has perceived the transience of all people and all things and asks where they have all gone, using a literary topos known by the Latin words for 'where are they?', *ubi sunt*, frequently exploited in homiletic literature.

The main structural problem in the poem involves the question of whether those stage directions of the inner frame (6–7 and 11), which are clearly in the voice of the scene-setting poet, refer backwards or forwards – i.e. to the voice which speaks the Christian frame or to the voice of the central monologue. An attractive interpretation has the poet's first *swā cwæþ* referring forwards to the monologue that is about to start and the second referring back to it once it has ended; then the outer, Christian, frame may be attributed to the poet also, who enunciates the Christian

precepts which the poem is designed to promote. Alternative interpretations (and there are several variations) would have the opening and closing lines (the outer frame) given to the wanderer himself. Whatever the case (and the creative possibilities of deliberate ambiguity are worth considering), if we accept that the same subject speaks both of the *swā cwæþ* passages, we accept that the *eardstapa* and the *stottor* are one and the same. The anguished wanderer, suffering the calamity of exile from an heroic community, has turned into a calmly philosophical man; he has thought his way through, and out of, suffering to reach a patient acceptance of the cruel fact that all worldly well-being is mutable. If we accept that the Christian frame is in the voice of the poet also, then the message of the poem is arguably the more powerful. The wanderer himself has not yet found the Christian answer to his predicament, but, as he sits apart in contemplation, he is on the brink of a revelation which we, of course (thanks to the poet), can see clearly.

The diction of *The Wanderer* links it closely with the other OE elegiac lyrics of exile and loss. The poet has a notable fondness for compound adjectives of suffering or longing, such as *seledrēorig* ('hall-sad', i.e. sad at the loss of a hall, 25) and *drēorightleor* ('sad-faced', 83), and three adjectives formed with *cearig* ('sorrowful' or 'anxious'): *mōdcearig* (2), *earncearig* (20) and *wintercearig* (24). Like the other poems of the Exeter Book, *The Wanderer* shows predominantly WS features in its language, but non-WS influences are apparent in the 'back-mutated' *e* in *sweotule* (11) and *meodthealle* (27), *ea* for *eo* in *wearþan* (64) and the prefix *bi* for *be* in *biddēled* (20), *bihtorene* (77), etc.

Further reading

- T. P. Dunning and A. J. Bliss, eds., *The Wanderer* (London, 1969)
 R. F. Leslie, ed., *The Wanderer*, rev. edn (Exeter, 1985)
 S. B. Greenfield, 'The Wanderer: a Reconsideration of Theme and Structure', *JEGP* 50 (1951), 451–65
 T. C. Rumble, 'From *eardstapa* to *stottor* on *mode*: the Structural Principle of *The Wanderer*', *MLQ* 19 (1958), 225–30
 G. Richman, 'Speaker and Speech Boundaries in *The Wanderer*', *JEGP* 81 (1982), 469–79
 R. E. Bjork, 'Sunder et Rune: the Voluntary Exile of The Wanderer', *Neophil.* 73 (1989), 119–29; repr. in *OE Poetry*, ed. Luzzza, pp. 315–27
 C. B. Pasternack, 'Anonymous Polyphony and *The Wanderer*'s Textuality', *ASE* 20 (1991), 99–122
 R. North, 'Boethius and the Mercenary in *The Wanderer*', in *Pagans and Christians: the Interplay between Christian Latin and Traditional Germanic Cultures in Early Medieval Europe*, ed. T. Hofstra et al. (Groningen, 1995), pp. 71–98

- 5 **OFT** him¹ ānhaga² 'āre gebideð³,
 metudes⁴ milste⁵, þēah þe⁶ hē mōdcearig⁷
 geond⁸ lagulāde⁹ longe¹⁰ sceolde¹¹
 'hrēran mid hondum¹² hrīncaelde¹³ sē,
 wadan¹⁴ 'wræclāstas'. 'Wyrð¹⁵ bið ful¹⁶ āræð¹⁷.
 Swā cwæþ eardstapa¹⁸, earfēpa¹⁹ gemyndig²⁰,
 wrāþra²¹ wælslehta²², winemæga²³ hryre²⁴.
 Ofi ic sceolde²⁵ āna²⁶ 'ūhina gehwylce²⁷
 mīne ceare²⁸ cwīpan²⁹. Nis³⁰ nū 'cwicra nān³¹
 10 'þe ic him³² mōdsefan³³ mīnne durre³⁴
 sweotule³⁵ āsecgan³⁶. Ic tō³⁷ sōþe³⁸ wāl³⁹
 þæt biþ⁴⁰ in eorle⁴¹ indryhten⁴² þēaw⁴³
 þæt hē his ferðlocan⁴⁴ fæste binde⁴⁵,
 healde⁴⁶ 'his hordcofan⁴⁷, hycge⁴⁸ swā⁴⁹ hē wille.
 15 Ne mæg wērig mōð⁵⁰ wyrde wiðstondan⁵¹,
 ne se hrēo⁵² hyge⁵³ helpe gefremman⁵⁴.

1 **OFT** In poetry, frequently an understatement for 'always'. **him** dat. of interest: 'for himself'. **āre gebideð** Possible meanings of the vb. (which usually governs a noun in the gen.; the fem. nouns *āre* and *milste* in 2 may be acc. or gen.) include 'wait for', 'endure', 'experience' and 'obtain'. The ambiguity may be deliberate, but the most likely central meaning, in view of the preceding adv. (*oft*), is that the solitary one, even though he endures the hardship of exile, will obtain or experience the 'grace' (*āre*) and 'mercy' of the Ordainer (*metud*, i.e. God). *Ār* itself (repeated in 114) has a wide semantic range but in the context 'grace', 'favour' or 'pity' seem apt.

2 **þēah þe** conj. phr.: 'though'.

4 **hrēran mid hondum** 'stir with (his) hands'. Presumably a figure for rowing or paddling with an oar.

5 **wræclāstas** 'paths of exile'. For other examples of the exile topos expressed thus, see *The Seafarer* (26/57) and *Beowulf* (1352). **Wyrð** Presumably 'fate' as divine Providence is implied here (see 33/5n); cf. 100 and 107.

7 **hryre** 'fall' or 'death'. We would expect a gen. here, parallel with *earfēpa* and *wælslehta*, and so *hryre* (masc.) may be an error for gen. pl. *hryra* or gen. sg. *hryres*.

8 **ūhtna gehwylce** dat. of time: 'at each dawn [lit. "of dawns"]'. More precisely, *ūltre* is the pre-dawn period, when the night and the wanderer's spirits are still dark.

9 **cwicra nān** 'none of living-ones', i.e. 'not one living'.

10 **þe...him** 'who...to him', i.e. 'to whom'.

14 **his hordcofan** 'his treasure-chamber'; clearly the 'treasury of his thoughts (*or heart*)'. Cf. the similar *ferðloca* in 13 and 33, and *brēostcofa* in 18.

- Forðon¹ 'dōmgeorne drēorigne'² oft
 in hyra brēostcofan³ bindað fæste.
 Swā ic⁴ mōdsefan mīnne⁵ sceolde⁶,
 20 oft earmecearig⁷ ēðle⁸ bidðæled⁹
 frēmægum¹⁰ feor¹¹, fetenum¹² sēlan¹³,
 sippan¹⁴ gēara¹⁵ iū¹⁶ goldwine¹⁷ mīne
 'hrūsān heolstre biwrah¹⁸ ond ic¹⁹ 'hean²⁰ þonan²¹
 wōð²² wintercearig²³ ofer waþerna²⁴
 gebind²⁵,
 25 sōhte²⁶ seledrēorig²⁷ sinces²⁸ bryttan²⁹
 hwær ic feor opþe³⁰ nēah findan meahie³¹
 þone³² þe in meoduhealle 'mīne wisse³³
 opþe mec³⁴ frēondlēasne³⁵ frēfran³⁶ wolde,
 wēman³⁷ mid wynnum³⁸. Wāt³⁹ sē⁴⁰ þe
 cunnað⁴¹
 30 hū slīpen⁴² bið sorg⁴³ tō⁴⁴ gefēran⁴⁵
 þām⁴⁶ þe 'him lýt⁴⁷ hafað⁴⁸ lēofra⁴⁹ geholena⁵⁰.
 Warað⁵¹ hine wræclāst, nales⁵² wunden⁵³ gold,
 ferðloca frēorig⁵⁴, nales foldan⁵⁵ biæd⁵⁶.
 Gemon⁵⁷ hē selescegas⁵⁸ ond
 sincþege⁵⁹,
 35 hū 'hine⁶⁰ on geoguðe⁶¹ his goldwine
 wenede⁶² tō wiste⁶³. Wyn eal gedrēas⁶⁴.

17 **dōmgeorne** adj. as noun (nom. pl.): 'those eager for glory (*or* renown)'. A recurrent theme of heroic literature is the eagerness of men to leave behind them a good reputation; see 26/72–80. **drēorigne** Possibly another adj. as noun (acc. sg.): 'a sorrowful thing'. Many editors take it as an adj. qualifying *hyge* in the previous line, so it is 'the sad heart' which is to be hidden, but this is not very convincing. It is likely that another noun after *drēorigne* has been lost in transmission or even that *drēorigne* was originally *drēorignes(se)*, 'sadness'.
 19 **mōdsefan mīne** 'my heart', obj. of *sceolde*... *sēlan*. Acc. sg. masc. *mīnne* has its 'correct' form here; cf. 22 and 27.

23 **hrūsān heolstre biwrah** The subj. of the vb. is *ic* in 19 (repeated in 23b); *heolstre* is dat. of instrument and *hrūsān* (an *n*-noun) is gen.: '(since) I covered... with the darkness of the earth'.

23–5 **hean...wintercearig...seledrēorig** Each adj. describes the state of mind of the wanderer; *seledrēorig* could be paraphrased 'sad for the want of a hall'.

27 **mīne wisse** This abrupt half-line has been emended in various (unsatisfactory) ways, but as it stands it can be interpreted 'might know (sbj. *wisse*) mine' or 'my own', i.e. be acquainted with his people and origins.

31 **him** rflx. dat., better not trans. **lýt hafað** A sort of litotes: the wanderer does not have *any* dear comrades.

35 **hine** obj. of *wenede* in 36.

- Forþon ƿāt sē þe sceal^o his winedryhtnes^o
 lēofes lārcwidum^o longe forþolian^o,
 40 ðonne sorg ond slāep somod^o ætgædre^o
 earme^o ānhogan oft gebindað^o.
 Þinceð^o him on mōde þæt hē his mondryhten^o
 clyppe^o ond cysse^o ond on cneo^o lecege^o
 honda ond heafod, swā hē hwīlum^o æt
 in gēardagum^o ƿgiefstōlas^o brēac^o.
 45 Ðonne onwæcneð^o eff^o winelēas^o gumā,
 gesihð^o him biforan^o fealwe^o wēgas^o,
 ƿapian brimfluglas^o, bræðan^o fepra^o,
 hrēosan^o hrim^o ond snāw, hagle^o gemenged^o. fall(ing) frost with hail mingled
 Þonne beoð^o þy^o hefigran^o heortan^o benne^o, the more grievous heart's wounds
 50 sære æfter swæсне. Sorg bið genitwad^o
 þonne māga^o gemynd^o mōð geonðhweorfed^o.
 Grēteð glīwstafum^o geomne^o geondscēawað^o
 sega^o geseldan^o. ƿSwimmað oft on weg^o.
 55 Flēotendra ferð nō þær fela bringeð
 cūðra cwīdegiedda^o. Cearo^o bið genitwad
 þām^o þe sendan sceal swīþe geneahhe^o
 ofer waþema gebind wērgne sefan^o.
 Forþon ic geþencan^o ne mæg geond^o þas woruld
 60 ƿfor hwan^o mōðsefa mīn ne gesweorce^o
 þonne ic eorla lif eal geondþence^o,
 hū hī fērlīce^o ƿflet ofgēafon^o,
 mōðge^o maguþegnas^o. Swā þes middangeard^o brave young retainers world

37 wāt Here (cf. 29), the vb. ('knows' or 'understands') is used absolutely, though a notional obj., 'these things', could be assumed.

44 giefstōlas Apparently a late (or erroneous) spelling of gen. sg. *giefstōles*: 'the gift-throne'; *brīcan* usually takes a gen. (but occasionally dat.) obj.

47 ƿapian brimfluglas acc. and inf. construction [§G6d.i.3]: '(sees) seabirds bathing'; similarly *bræðan* and, in 48, *hrēosan*.

50 sære æfter swæсне 'painful [i.e. the wounds] in pursuit of (or in longing for) the beloved (one)'.

53 Swinmað oft on weg 'Often they float away'. On *oft*, see 1n.

54-5 Flēotendra ferð... cūðra cwīdegiedda The 'floating ones' or 'swimmers' are the speechless sea-birds who, in the return to reality, replace the dreamed-of loved ones: 'The spirit of the floating ones does not bring there many familiar utterances' (in fact, none at all).

59 ƿfor hwan 'for what [instr.], i.e. 'why'.

61 flet ofgēafon 'gave up the floor [of the mead-hall]'; i.e. died.

- ƿealra dōgra gehwām^o drēoseð^o ond fealleþ.
 Forþon ne mæg wearþan^o wīs wer^o ær hē āge^o declines
 65 ƿwintra dæl in woruldriçe. Wita^o ƿseal^o gepyldig^o,
 ne sceal^o nō tō hātheort^o ne tō hredwyrde^o,
 ne tō wāc^o wiga^o ne tō wanhydig^o,
 ne tō forht^o ne tō fegen^o ne tō feongifre^o fearful joyful 'wealth-greedy'
 ne næfre gielpes^o tō geom^o ƿær hē geare cunne^o.
 70 Beorn^o sceal gebīðan^o, þonne hē beot^o spriced^o,
 oppæt collenferð^o cunne gearwe^o until stout-hearted fully
 hwider^o hreþrā gehygd^o hweorfān^o wille. where thought to turn
 Ongietan^o sceal glēaw^o hæle^o hū gæstlic^o bið Realise prudent man awful
 þonne ealre þisse worulde wela^o wēste^o stondeð,
 75 swā nū missenlice^o geond þisne middangeard
 winde biwātne^o weallas stonðap blown (by +d)
 hīrme bihrotene^o. Hryðge^o þā ederas^o, covered (by +d) Storm-beaten buildings
 wōriað^o þā wīnsalo^o, waldend^o licgað^o crumble wine-halls rulers lie (dead)
 drēame^o bidrotene^o. Dugup^o eal joy deprived (of +d) Noble company
 gecrong^o fell
 80 wlonc^o bi^o wealle; sume^o wīg^o fornōm^o, proud near some ap war destroyed
 ferede^o in forðwege^o, sumne^o fugel^o oppæt^o carried one as bird bore away
 ofer heanne^o holm^o, sumne se hāra^o wulf deep ocean grey
 ƿdeaðe gedælde^o, sumne ƿdrēorighlēor^o sad-faced
 in eorðscrafe^o eorl gehydde^o. earth-grave buried
 85 ƿpde^o swā þisne eardgeard^o ælda^o Laid waste habitation as men's
 scyppend^o creator
 oppæt burgwara^o breahtra^o lēase^o of citizens of the revelries deprived

63 ealra dōgra gehwām 'on each of all days', i.e. 'each and every day'.

65 wintra dæl in woruldriçe lit. 'a deal of winters in the kingdom of the world; i.e. in this world. sceal The vb. 'be' must be supplied [§G2d].

66 nō tō The use of the formula 'not too...' is rhetorical; warriors should not be passionate, etc. *at all*. Catalogues of 'dos and don'ts' are characteristic of wisdom literature; a biblical warning against consorting with bold, passionate or foolish people, and against speaking openly, is to be found in Ecclesiastes 8:18-22; cf. also 34/23.

69 ær hē geare cunne 'before he clearly knows [subj.], i.e. before he is fully aware of what his boast may entail. The theme is continued in the next three lines.

72 hreþra 'of (his) heart (or mind)'. The OE idiom uses a pl. where ModE prefers sg.

81 in forðwege 'on the onward path (or way ahead)'; i.e. to death and whatever follows.

83 deaðe gedælde The detail of this image is unclear. The vb. has a range of meanings, allowing 'received a share of in death' or 'shared with death', or even 'dismembered in death'. dreorighlēor Describes *eorl* in 84.

- 90 f'æald entia^o geweorc^{en} īdlu^o stōdon.
 Sē^o þonne þisne wealsteal^o wīse
 gefōhte^o
 ond þis deorce^o lif^o dēore geondþenceð,
 frōð^o in ferðe^o, feor^o oft gemon^o
 wælsleahtra worn^o ond þās word ācwīð^o:
 "Hwær cwōm mearg?¹ Hwær cwōm mago^o? Hwær cwōm
 māþþungyfa^o?
 Hwær cwōm symbla^o gesetu^o? Hwær sindon
 seledrēamas?² Ealā byrnwiga^o!
 Ealā þēodnes^o prym^o! Hū sēo þrāg^o gewāt^o,
 95 genāp^o under niðhelm^o "swā hēo nō wære".
 Stondeð nū 'on lāste lēofre dugube³
 weal wundrum^o hēah, wyrmlicum^o
 fāh^o.
 Eorlas^o fornōman^o asca^o þrýþe^o, The men *ap* took off of ash(-spears) hosts
 100 wāpen^o wægfrū^o, wyrd sēo mære^o, weapons 'slaughter-greedy' renowned
 ond þās stānhleopu^o stormas cnyssað^o, rocky slopes *ap* batter
 hrīð^o hrōsende^o hrūsan bīndeð, snowstorm *ns* falling
 wintres wōma^o. Þonne won^o cymeð, howling *ns*
 nipeð^o nihtscia^o, noþpan^o onsendeð^o darkens 'night-shadow' from north
 105 hrēo^o hæglfare^o hællepum^o on^o andan^o. fierce hailstorm to men as terror
- 87 **eald enta geweorc** See 33/2n. A nom. pl. neut. inflection on *eald* has presumably
 been elided before the vowel of *enta*.
 92 **Hwær cwōm mearg?** 'Where did the horse go?' On this rhetorical device, see the
 headline; *cwōm* preserves an earlier form of the vb, before contraction.
 93 **cwōm** A sg. form for a vb. whose pl. subj. (here *gesetu*) follows it is usual (§G6f)
 (but this does not apply to the vb. 'be').
 94 **Ealā beorht bune!** Either 'Alas (*or* O), the bright goblet!' or 'Alas for...'.
 96 **swā hēo nō wære** The pluperf. is appropriate in trans.: 'as though it had not [i.e. had
 never] been'.
 97 **on lāste lēofre dugube** 'in the track of the dear company'; i.e. after their
 departure.
 103 **Þonne** Here interpreted as an adv.: 'Then'; but it could be (with adjustment of
 punctuation) the conj. 'when...'. **won** This is probably the adj. meaning 'dark', in which
 case it must go, however awkwardly, with *nihtscia* in 104, which is therefore complemented
 by both *cymeð* and *nipeð*. Some editors argue that *won* is being used as a noun, the subj. of
cymeð.
 104 **onsendeð** 'sends'. The subj. is *nihtscia*. Cf. 30/31.

- 110 f'Eall¹ is earfōðlic^o eorþan rīce,
 onwendeð^o f'wyrda gesceaft¹ weoruld under heofonom.
 Hēr bið feoli^o f'lāne², hēr bið frēond lāne,
 hēr bið mon lāne, hēr bið mæg^o lāne,
 110 eal þis eorþan gesteal^o īdel weorpeð^o!
 Swā cwæð snottor^o on mōde, gesæf^o f'him¹ sundor^o
 f'æt rūne¹.
 Til^o biþ sē þe his trēowe^o gehealdeþ^o; f'ne sceal næfre
 115 his torn tō rycene
 beorn of his brēostum ācýþan¹ nempe^o f'hē¹ ær^o
 f'þā bōte^o cunne,
 eorl mid elne^o gefremman^o. f'Wel bið þām þe him¹ āre
 sēceð,
 115 frōfre^o tō^o fæder on heofonom þær ūs^o eal sēo
 fæstnung^o stondeð.
 106 **Eall** This may be the subj. pron. 'all', in which case *eorþan rīce* is an adv. phr.: 'All
 in the kingdom of earth...'. But *rīce* may itself be the subj., in which case *eall* is either an
 adv., 'entirely', as in 36, 60 and 79, or an adj., describing *rīce*: 'The whole kingdom...'.
 107 **wyrda gesceaft** 'the disposition of the fates'; i.e. the ordained course of events.
 This is the subj. of *onwendeð*, with *weoruld* the obj.
 108 **lāne** lit. 'loaned' (cf. *lānan* 'to lend'), but 'temporary', 'transitory', 'passing' or
 'ephemeral' are among the available renderings.
 111 **him rīfx.** dat., best not trans. **æt rūne** Meanings of the noun (which is also used
 for the letters of the runic alphabet) include 'consultation' or '(secret) counsel'. Here it is
 clearly one man consulting with himself, so a suitable trans. is 'in contemplation' or 'in
 thought'.
 112–13 **ne sceal... ācýþan** The subj. of this sentence is *beorn*, the obj. *tor* ('anger');
 'a man must never too hastily (*rycene*) reveal his anger from his breast'; pl. *brēostum* usually
 has sg. meaning (§D41).
 113 **hē** Parallel with *eorl* in 114 and probably better not trans. **þā bōte** 'the remedy',
 obj. of *cunne gefremman*.
 114 **Wel bið þām þe him** 'It will be well for the one (*þām*) who for himself...'.