POEMS ON THE MEANING OF LIFE

This section is intended as a tribute to the Exeter Book, without which English literature would be far poorer. The Exeter Book was bequeathed to its Cathedral Library by the half-French Bishop Leofric in 1072. Over the Channel and in England during this Klondyke Norman time, a new form of chivalric literature was stirring which would transform love poetry into the roman courtois (see Early Chivalry). And here we have a book containing many short poems now known as ‘elegies’, some of which celebrate the pathos of love, as well as Christ’s life and works, Saints’ Lives, God, fate, nature and nurture, sex and entertainment. The provenance of this book is uncertain, let alone its place of origin, though the hand of the one scribe gives reason to suppose that it was copied in stages in the 960–70s. Leofric appears to have described it in his inventory as micel englisce boc be gehwilcum þingum on leoðwisan geworht ‘a great English book made up in verse about various things’. Such will be the character, we hope, of this section. Greater poems will here be given in extract, lesser ones usually in their entirety. As with the previous section, however, we intend to mix these poems with others composed in a similar vein. The Wanderer, a meditation on bereavement and Providence, is thus followed by Hard Loss of Sons, a true elegy to a son who was the light of the poet’s life. The Seafarer explores the world beyond, inciting ecstasy as a means of approaching God. Yet other poems, Norse as well as English, are less strenuous and reflect on men and women and the everyday. The Rhyming Poem, on changes of life, experiments by changing the traditional English for a new Latin-based poetic form. Then there are Riddles, which offer surreal perspectives on the things and people we all take for granted. Some of the elegies that follow have been read as Riddles too, so mysterious they are, with their poets using heroic legends as a vehicle for ideas about love.

The genre of these Exeter Book poems ‘on various things’ remains problematic: ‘elegies’, ‘wisdom’ and ‘riddles’ have been variously accepted as markers for most of the poems here. Yet the OE term giedd (‘song’) is found in most poems of each supposed category. The fact that OIce geð (‘soul’, ‘affection’, ‘spirit’), the formal cognate of OE giedd, is also a prominent word in two of the Norse poems quoted here, reveals an archaic common ground between most of the poems in this section which is sufficient for the OE term, at any rate, to be treated as the contemporary name for the genre. Where our terms are concerned, in any case, ‘elegies’, ‘wisdom’ and ‘riddles’ are really different aspects of the same kind of poetry. This is why we decided to call the present section Poems on the Meaning of Life.

General bibliography
Neville, J., ‘Joyous play and bitter tears: the *Riddles* and the *Elegies*’, *B&OS* 130–59
Williamson, Craig, *The Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1977)
The Wanderer

The Wanderer was highly regarded by the compiler of the Exeter Book, in which it is now found in folios 76 verso on into 78 recto. Two-thirds of the way into the tenth century, this poem was copied into the first booklet of the manuscript as its fourth poem (after Azarias, The Phoenix and Cynewulf’s Juliana), before a new booklet was sewn on to the front with five lengthier poems (Christ I, II (Cynewulf) and III and Guthlac A and B). The Wanderer is a devoutly Christian poem, yet not openly so, for in it Christ’s name is not mentioned once. The poem thus marks the beginning of the so-called ‘elegies’ of the Exeter Book in which Christian concerns are expressed through largely secular forms of wisdom and experience. In keeping with this, the question of who speaks where in this poem is often left to one side as immaterial, and the poem is read as the transformation of a character from long-term sufferer to wise philosopher at the end.

The present text has a more traditional view. Here the poet’s unnamed persona introduces an unnamed heroic type whose life, according to his speech from line 8 onwards, is spent moving from one court to another in his search for a new employer. This is the Wanderer. The present text fixes the end of the Wanderer’s speech at line 29a. Thereafter the poet’s persona describes the lonely Wanderer again and the dreams, disappointments and apparent hallucinations of his dismal life, before speaking as himself at the poem’s mid-point, on line 58. Here the poem becomes didactic, a little fabulous, even mystical, as the poet’s persona urges a man to be moderate in all things and ready to accept the world’s end as surely as he does his own. At this point he creates a new archetype, a Wise Man, whose speech in lines 92–110 reflects on the world’s decline. The first difference between Wise Man and Wanderer is that the Wise Man’s words are hypermetric, unstable and emotionally turbulent. The second difference is that the Wanderer knows only fate, the impact of events, whereas the Wise Man knows that there is a Providence that fashions them. To say that the first type develops into the second is to describe this religious poem as if it were a psychological novel. A less anachronistic approach would be to see the Wanderer as a heathen stoic, godless and going nowhere in a Christian sense, and the Wise Man as a philosopher whose speech contains an epiphany. Like Boethius in his De consolatione Philosophiae ‘On the Consolation of Philosophy’, the poet of The Wanderer reaches enlightenment through stages of teaching, fable and poetry. He is a Christian but never becomes explicit about the Christian message, which is implied, never revealed. Moreover he lays false trails, with one archetype whose narrative identifies him with mercenary heroic life, and with another who seems to sit in a library. The poet’s tantalising evasive style brings his work close to a riddle, but never close enough to be classed as one. The meanings one can infer are various, but the compiler was in no doubt about the excellence of this poem. The Wanderer may be read for a lifetime and still yield something new.

Poems on the Meaning of Life


Richardson, J., ‘Two notes on the time frame of The Wanderer (lines 22 and 73–87)’, Neophilologus 73 (1989), 158–9


Oft him anhaga are gebideð,  
Metudes miltse, þeah þe he modcearig  
geond lagulade længe sceolde  
hreran mid hondum hrimcealde sæ,  
wadan wæclastas. Wyrd bið ful aræd!

Swa cwæð earstapa, earfæþa gemynig,  
wræþra wælslehta, winemæga hryre:  
‘Oft ic sceolde ana uhtna gehwylce  
mine ceare cwîpan. Nis nu cwicra nan

Often a lone survivor experiences grace,  
Measurer’s mercy, though, sad at heart  
across the paths of ocean long has he had to  
stir with his arms the rime-cold sea,  
travel the roads of exile. Fate is fully determined.

Thus spoke the Wanderer, mindful of hardships,  
of cruel savage slaughters, of the ruin of friends and family:  
‘It is often alone each early dawn I have had to  
lament my griefs. There is no one alive

1 anhaga ‘lone survivor’. See Dunning and Bliss (1969: 37–40). Most probably the same word as anhaga in earmne anhogan on line 40, especially as in Beowulf, line 2368, the bereaved hero swims back to Geatland as an earm anhaga ‘wretched lone survivor’ of Hygelac’s Frisian raid. More figurative uses: for the Phoenix, in The Phoenix, line 87, and in Guthlac B, line 997, enge anhaga ‘mean lone survivor’ for death; and for the subject of Riddle 5.1 (shield, or chopping block). [are gebideð ‘experiences grace’. The ge-prefix on bidan ‘wait, endure’ suggests ‘getting something by waiting for it’, hard to render in Modern English. In addition, the rowing in line 4 makes ‘experiences the oar’ a momentarily viable meaning for line 1 (f. ar means both). Does the poem start by trying to mislead us?

5 Wyrd bið ful aræd ‘Fate is fully determined’. The poet either invokes predestination, or gives this half-line as the Wanderer’s unthinking response to his lot, or both.

6 Swa cwæð ‘Thus spoke’. A clear rubric which has been taken to look back to lines 1–5 as well as forward to the speech beginning on line 8. See note to line 111, where Swa cwæð looks back.

6–7 The words earfæþa, wælslehta and hryre are all in the genitive, dependent on gemynig. A lifetime’s experience is compressed into a small space, as if to capture the workings of memory.
The Wanderer

10 to whom my thoughts and feelings I dare say clearly. I know, in truth, that in a gentleman it is a courtly virtue that he bind fast his spirit locker, keep in his hoard-coffer, let him think what he will.

15 Neither can a weary heart withstand fate, nor can the angry mind extend any help. And so men eager for glory often bind fast their sad minds in their breast-coffers; Likewise I have had to seal, often wretchedly grieving,

20 robbed of my inherited land, far from noble kinsmen, my own thoughts and feelings with fetters, since long long ago my gold-giving friend I covered with soil’s holster, and disgraced from that place
I travelled, grieving in winter, over the waves’ binding,
25 sad in a hall went searching for a dispenser of treasure,
where, far or near, I might be able to find
the man who would know what I like in the mead-hall,
or would want to give me solace in my friendless state,
draw me in with joy.’

He knows, who tries it,
30 how sharp sorrow is as a travelling companion to the man
who has few dear associates he might call his own.
Exile’s road keeps hold of him, not fine-twisted gold,
a frozen mind-locker, not the glory of earth.
He remembers hall-servants and receiving treasure,
35 how in his youth his gold-giving friend
would accustom him to the banquet. Joy all fell away.
And so he knows, who must long suffer without
The Wanderer

leofes larcwidum longe forþolian,
ßonne sorg ond slæp somod ætgædre
40 earmne anhogan oft gebindað,
þinceð him on mode þæt he his mondryhten
clyppe ond cyss, ond on cneo lege
honda ond heafod, swa he hwilum ær
in geardagum giefstolas breac.

45 Þonne onwæcneð eft wineleas guma,
gesihð him biforan fealwe wegas,
þælian brimfuglas, brædan feþra,
hreosan hrim ond snaw, hagle gemenged.
Þonne beoð þy he/g192 gran heortan benne,
sare æfter swæsne. Sorg bið geniwad,
þonne maga gemynd mod geondhweorfeð.
Greteð gliwstafum, georne geondsceawað

the teachings pronounced by his beloved friend and lord,
that when sorrow and sleep, in combination,
40 often bind up the lone survivor,
it seems to him in his mind that he embraces and kisses
his man and lord, and places on his knee
his hand and his head, just as in former times
in the old days he enjoyed gifts from the throne.

45 Then the man without friends awakens once more,
sees fallow waves in front of him,
sea-birds bathing, stretching out their wings,
frost and snow falling mingled in with hail.
Heavier to bear then are heart’s wounds,
50 grief for the sweet man. Sorrow is renewed
when feeling moves through memory of kinsmen.
He greets them with their notes of music, with yearning he observes,

44 giefstolas breac ‘enjoyed gifts from the throne’. The scene in the Wanderer’s dream is a thegn’s personal love for his king stylised within the limits of the ritual of homage.

46 fealwe wegas ‘fallow waves’. Colours are difficult. There are fealwe mearas ‘tawny stallions’ riding on fealwe stræte ‘a dusty road’ in Beowulf, lines 865 and 916 (see Heroic Poems) and fealwe blostman ‘blossoms . . . (autumnal) brown’ in The Phoenix, line 74. Here the etymological sense ‘fallow’ captures (a) mud and (b) the barenness of salt (in contrast with foldan blæd ‘glory of earth’ on line 33).

51 mod geondhweorfeð ‘feeling moves through’. On parallels for mod as the subject, gemynd as the object of this verb, see Dunning and Bliss (1969: 21–2), and compare with Alfred’s cuman on gemynd ‘come to memory’ constructions in his Preface to the West Saxon translation of Gregory’s Pastoral Care (The Earliest English Prose).

52 Greteð gliwstafum ‘He greets them with (their) notes of music’. The meaning of these lines is a puzzle still waiting to be solved. For a theory that this is (a) the Wanderer observing birds for omens, and beneath that (b) Ulysses observing the Sirens (a trio of musicians according to Isidore’s Etymologies) for what they have to offer, see North (1995: 88–91). Gliwstafum occurs only here. ‘Joyfully’ (Dunning and Bliss 1969: 58, 133) is wrong for this, given that gliw means ‘music’.
the companions of men always swim away.
The minds of floating ones will never in that place bring
many familiar articulate songs. Care is renewed
for the man who must very constantly send
over wave's binding a weary sense.

For this reason I cannot think through this world
why my own mind does not darken,
when I ponder all the lives of men,
how they suddenly gave up the floor,
brave young thegns. Thus this Middle World
each and every day and night declines and falls.
And so a man cannot become wise until he may possess
his share of winters in the worldly kingdom. A wise man must be patient,
ever too hot-headed, nor too hasty of speech,
nor too weak a fellow, nor too reckless,

54 Fleotendra ferô 'minds of the floating ones'. Of the birds, otherwise seen here as men's companions.
OE ferô is in the singular, but with a plural meaning. The birds are not the intelligent oracles of
information which heathen augury makes them out to be, is what the poet seems to mean: they
can give the Wanderer no comfort.

58 The subject switches here out of third back into the first person for the first time since line 29a.
This point is also halfway through the whole poem. The emphasis on þas worulđ 'this world' and min
'my', both in third-stress positions, announces the following as the poet's personal reflection, his
authenticating voice, between his personae of Wanderer (line 8–29a) and Wise Man (lines 92–110).

59 for hwan modsefa min ne gesweorce 'why my own mind does not darken'. Optimism. The poet's
mind does not darken, and he cannot think why, although it will soon become clearer that heaven
is the reason for his lightening mood.

66–9 The intense ne-anaphora is part of homiletic discourse, in which the poet must have been trained
(Klinck 1992: 119). Is he, by implication, also wita 'wise man', the member of an ecclesiastical or
other political council? At any rate, he urges moderation in all things, as a conciliator might.
ne to forht ne to fægen, ne to feohgifre
ne næfre gielpes to georn, ær he geare cunne.

70 Beorn sceal gebidan, þonne he beot spriðð,
oþþæt collenferð cunne gearwe
hwider hreðra gehygð hweorfan wille.
Ongietan sceal gleaw hæle hu gæstlic bið,
þonne ealre þisse worulde wela weste stondeð,
swa nu missenlice geond pisne middangeard
winde biwaune weallas stondaþ,
hrime bihrorene, hryðge þa ederas.
Woriað þa winsalo, waldend licgað
dreame bidrorene, duguþ eal gecrong,

75 wlonc bi wealle. Sume wig fornom,
ferde in forðwege, sumne fugel oþbær
ofrer heanne holm, sumne se hara wulf
deaðe gedælde, sumne dreorighleor
in eorðscæfe eorl gehydde.

nor too frightened, nor too relieved, nor too eager for money
nor ever too eager to boast before he sees what things are.

70 A man must wait when he makes a vow,
or when, stout-hearted, he may clearly see
in which direction the thoughts of his mind will tend.
A prudent man must take it in, how terrifying it will be
when the wealth of all this world stands waste,

75 just as now, variously throughout this middle world,
the walls stand blown upon by wind,
encrusted with frost, snow-swept the buildings.
Those wine halls crumble, their rulers lie
deprived of the good times, all the host has perished,

80 arrogant by the wall. Killing took some men,
carried them on the way forth, a bird bore off another
over the high seas, the hoary-coated wolf shared
another man with death, a sad-featured nobleman
hid yet another man in an earthen grave.

72 *hreðra gehygð* ‘the thoughts of his mind.’ The only other surviving example of this collocation is in
*Beowulf*, line 2045, where an old mercenary probes the young Heathobard’s *hreðra gehygð* for what
he is really thinking (see *Heroic Poems*). This phrase thus denotes the mind in its more tangled
state before concentration allows one thought to emerge.

73 *hu gæstlic bið* ‘how terrifying it will be’. A parallel sense development, from ‘spiritual’, is found
in the word *ghastly* (Dunning and Bliss 1969: 53). But a positive vision of oneself as ‘ghost’ proceeding
to heaven on Doomsday is what the poet is also keen to promote.

81 *sumne fugel oþbær* ‘a bird bore off another’. The physical entirety of this transport poses a problem
if we understand a raven with flesh from the dead, as most readers do (Klinck 1992: 122). Other
suggestions lie further out, including North’s that this bird is a Siren carrying off a sailor figu-
Thus Man’s Creator destroyed this world’s habitations,
until, bereft of the revelries of the inhabitants of their towns,
the ancient works of giants stood idle.

He then who wisely thought of this foundation
and this dark life deeply thinks through,
90 experienced in heart, from far back often remembers
a number of cruel slaughters, and will say these words:

‘What came of the horse? Of the young man? What came of the wealth-giver?
What came of the banqueting halls? Where are the good times of the hall?
Alas the bright beaker! Alas the man in chained mail!

Alas the king’s magnificence! How that time passed away,
grew dark beneath night’s cover as if it had never been.
Stands now in the track of the beloved host
a wall wondrously high, painted with serpentine forms.
Warriors were taken by the strength of ashen spears,
by weapons keen to taste slaughter, by fate the infamous,
and these stone cliffs the storms do buffet,

85 Yðde swa ðisne eardgeard æelda Scyppend
Thus Man’s Creator destroyed’ etc. An oxymoron, unless one thinks of the periodic annihilations of Genesis (which are in man’s interest). The vocabulary inevitably recalls that of Cædmon’s Hymn (see Poems of Devotion).

92 Hwær cwom mearg? ‘What came of the horse?’ etc. The language is homiletic, with hypermetric lines, anaphora (with eala also) and the use of a motif known as ubi sunt ‘where are?’ (Cross 1956). The querulous voice of this speaker, the ‘Wise Man’, is quite different to the dismal mood of the Wanderer earlier. If the same voice, then the speaker has become more distressed.

98 weal wundrum heah, wyrmlicum fah ‘wall wondrously high, painted with serpentine forms’. Still a puzzle waiting to be solved. The line at any rate captures the idea of human cycles, the lost greatness of civilisations now vanished.
a blizzard descending binds the ground,
winter’s tumult, when darkness comes,
when night-shadow grows black, from the north is dispatched
105 an angry hail-storm in malice against men.
All is full of hardship in the kingdom of earth,
the shaping of events changes the world beneath the heavens.
Here money is borrowed, here friend is borrowed,
here man is borrowed, here family man is borrowed,
110 all this earth’s foundation will become empty!’

Thus spoke a man clever in mind, sat apart with himself in secret counsel.
Excellent is he who keeps his faith, nor shall a man ever reveal
grief from his breast too quickly, unless he, a gentleman, can first
carry out the cure with courage. It will be well for him who seeks grace,
115 solace from the Father in heaven, where security waits entirely for us.