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The Wanderer

It is now generally agreed that *The Wanderer* is a complete poem dealing in a consistently Christian manner with a coherent theme. Agreement in detail about the theme and structure is however lacking, and the literature on the poem is copious and shows no sign of abating. A summary of my interpretation follows. The paradox is propounded that despite the hardships of his life the lonely exile often feels the grace of God (ll. 1-5). Someone then narrates his personal experiences of exile (ll. 8-29), which he gives a more general application by appealing to others who have had similar experiences (ll. 29-57). This consideration leads him to feel that he cannot understand why in the face of so much suffering and the general prospect of decay he is not depressed (ll. 58-63). Various precepts are advanced about how one should live, leading to the statement that one must understand the nature of the end of the world, of which the present signs of decline and the historical example of the Flood are tokens (ll. 64-87).* He who has thought deeply about all this may well ask: 'Where have all the former glories of earth gone? Only ruins and the dark and cold remain. Everything earthly is transitory' (ll. 88-110). It will be well for those with faith, for all our security is with God (ll. 111-115).

Even if one disagrees in detail with the line of thought sketched in this summary, some such coherent theme can be seen to work through the poem. The problems are greatly increased by the uncertainty about where the speeches in the poem begin and end. The punctuation of the manuscript gives no help, and it is worth remembering that the placing of inverted commas in the editions is purely according to the opinion of the editors. There are three

* J. A. Burrow, 'The Wanderer: ll. 73-87', *Notes and Queries*, N.S. xii, 1965.

THE WANDERER

clues, at ll. 6, 91, and 111. The second of these is unambiguous: a speech is about to begin. The other two could mean that a speech has ended or is about to begin, or even that it has already begun and is going to continue. The word *cwæð* at l. 111 may mean that the speech which began at l. 92 has ended, but it is strange that l. 91 has *ācwīð* in the present whereas *cwæð* is past. Most of the suggestions which have been advanced are listed here: a speech begins at l. 8, or at l. 1 and continues at l. 8; this speech ends during l. 29 or at l. 57 or l. 63 or l. 87 or l. 110 or l. 115, in the last two cases containing another speech; the speech beginning at l. 92 ends at l. 110 or l. 96; or the whole poem may be one speech containing another with the exception of stage directions at ll. 6-7 and 111; or the whole poem may be a dramatic monologue containing two reported speeches ll. 1-5 and ll. 92-110. I offer the last suggestion and have printed it so, but the reader must make his own decision.

It is surprising that the first separate edition of this poem was that of R. F. Leslie in 1966. The second, by T. P. Dunning and A. J. Bliss, has appeared since this book first went to the printers. These two editions are invaluable to anyone who takes a serious interest in the poem. Between them they supply a full and up to date bibliography and summarise all the earlier disputes, adding important new suggestions.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Kershaw

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Sweet ASR

R. F. Leslie, *The Wanderer*, Manchester, 1966

T. P. Dunning and A. J. Bliss, *The Wanderer*, Methuen's Old English Library, London, 1969

The Wanderer

'Oft him ānhaga āre gebīdeð,
 Metudes miltse, þeah þe hē mōdcearig
 geond lagulāde longe sceolde
 hrēran mid hondum hrīmcealde sǣ,
 5 wadan wræclāstas; wyrd bið ful ārǣd.'
 Swā cwæð eardstapa earfeða gemyndig,
 wrāpra wælsleahta, winemæga hryre.
 Oft ic sceolde āna ūhtna gehwylce
 mīne ceare cwīpan. Nis nū cwicra nān
 10 þe ic him mōdsefan mīnne durre
 sweotule āsecgan. Ic tō sōþe wāt
 þæt biþ in eorle indryhten þēaw
 þæt hē his ferðlocan fæste binde,
 healde his hordcofan, hycge swā hē wille.
 15 Ne mæg wērigmōd wyrde wiðstandan,
 ne se hrēo hyge helpe gefremman.
 For ðon dōmgeorne drēorigne oft
 in hyra brēostcofan bindað fæste.
 Swā ic mōdsefan mīnne sceolde,
 20 oft earmcearig, ēðle biðæled,
 frēomægum feor, feterum sǣlan,
 siþpan gēara iū goldwine mīnne
 hrūsan heolstre biwrah and ic hēan þonan
 wōd wintercearig ofer waþema gebind,

1. *gebīdeð*. Editors and translators have variously stated or implied that this form is part of *gebīdan* or *gebīddan*, and there is further disagreement about whether the *ge-* makes the verb perfective. The *þeah þe* clause makes it clear that the sentence is a paradox, so we can dismiss those interpretations which give 'waits for, prays for, seeks for' etc., as no Christian would be surprised that one should wait, pray or seek for God's grace when surrounded by hardship; but it would be important and interesting that one should *experience* grace despite earthly troubles.

6. Whether *swa cwæð* means a speech precedes or follows has been much but inconclusively debated.

The Wanderer

'Often the solitary man enjoys
 The grace and mercy of the Lord, though he
 Careworn has long been forced to stir by hand
 The ice-cold sea on many waterways,
 Travel the exile's path; fate is relentless.'
 So spoke a wanderer who called to mind
 Hardships and cruel wars and deaths of lords.
 Frequently have I had to mourn alone
 My cares each morning; now no living man
 Exists to whom I dare reveal my heart
 Openly; and I know it for a truth
 That in a man it is a noble virtue
 To hide his thoughts, lock up his private feelings,
 However he may feel. A weary heart
 Cannot oppose inexorable fate,
 And anxious thoughts can bring no remedy.
 And so those jealous of their reputation
 Often bind fast their sadness in their breasts.
 So I, careworn, deprived of fatherland,
 Far from my noble kin, have often had
 To tie in fetters my own troubled spirit,
 Since long ago I wrapped my lord's remains
 In darkness of the earth, and sadly thence
 Journeyed by winter over icy waves,

THE WANDERER

232

25 sōhte sele drēorig sinces bryttan,
 hwær ic feor oþpe nēah findan meahte
 þone þe in meoduhealle mīn mine wisse,
 oþpe mec frēondlēasne frēfran wolde,
 wēman mid wynnum. Wāt se þe cunnað

30 hū slīpen bið sorg tō gefēran
 þām þe him lýt hafað lēofra geholena;
 warað hine wræclāst, nāles wunden gold,
 ferðloca frēorig, nālæs foldan blæd;
 gemon hē selessecgas and sincþege,
 35 hū hine on geoguðe his goldwine
 wenede tō wiste; wyn eal gedrēas.
 For þon wāt se þe sceal his winedryhtnes
 lēofes lārcwidum longe forþōlian,
 ðonne sorg and slāp somod ætgædre

40 earmne ānhogan oft gebindað:
 þinceð him on mōde þæt hē his mondryhten
 clyppe and cysse and on cnēo lecge
 honda and hēafod, swā hē hwilum ær
 in gēardagum giefstōles brēac;

45 ðonne onwæcneð eft winelēas guma,
 gesihð him biforan fealwe wēgas,
 bapian brimfuglas, brædan fepra,
 hrēosan hrīm and snāw hagle gemenged.
 Þonne bēoð þý hefigran heortan benne,

50 säre æfter swæsne. Sorg bið geniwad
 þonne māga gemynd mōd geondhweorfeð,
 grēteð gliwstafum, georne geondscēawað.
 Secga geseldan swimmað oft on weg,
 flēotendra ferð nō þær fela bringeð

55 cūðra cwidegiedda. Cearo bið geniwad
 þām þe sendan sceal swīpe geneahhe
 ófer waþema gebind wērigne sefan.

41-4. Translation paraphrased to clarify the nature of the ritual described.

THE WANDERER

And suffering sought the hall of a new patron,
 If I in any land might find one willing
 To show me recognition in his mead-hall,
 Comfort my loneliness, tempt me with pleasures.
 He knows who has experienced it how bitter
 Is sorrow as a comrade to the man
 Who lacks dear human friends; fair twisted gold
 Is not for him, but rather paths of exile,
 Coldness of heart for the gay countryside.
 He calls to mind receiving gifts of treasure
 And former hall-retainers, and remembers
 How in his younger years his lordly patron
 Was wont to entertain him at the feast.
 Now all that joy has gone. He understands
 Who long must do without the kind advice
 Of his beloved lord, while sleep and sorrow
 Together often bind him, sad and lonely,
 How in his mind it seems that he embraces
 And kisses his liege lord, and on his knee
 Lays hand and head, as when he formerly
 Received as a retainer in the hall
 Gifts from the throne; but then the joyless man
 Wakes up and sees instead the yellow waves,
 The sea-birds bathing, stretching out their wings,
 While snow and hail and frost fall all together.
 The heart's wounds seem by that yet heavier,
 Grief for the dear one gone: care is renewed,
 When memories of kinsmen fill the mind,
 He greets them gladly, contemplates them keenly,
 But his old friends swim frequently away;
 The floating spirits bring him all too few
 Of the old well-known songs; care is renewed
 For him who must continually send
 His weary spirit over icy waves.

THE WANDERER

For þon ic geþencan ne mæg geond þās woruld
 for hwan mōdsefa mīn ne gesweorce
 60 þonne ic eorla lif eal geondþence,
 hū hī fārlice flet ofgēafon,
 mōdige maguþegnas. Swā þes middangeard
 ealra dōgra gehwām drēosed and fealleþ.
 For þon ne mæg weorþan wīs wer ær hē āge
 65 wintra dæl in woruldrīce. Wita sceal gēþyldig,
 ne sceal nō tō hātheort ne tō hrædwyrde,
 ne tō wāc wiga ne tō wanhýdig,
 ne tō forht ne tō fægen ne tō feohgífre,
 ne nāfre gielpes tō georn ær hē gearu cunne.
 70 Beorn sceal gebidan þonne hē bēot spriced
 oþ þæt collenferð cunne gearwe
 hwider hreþra gehygd hweorfan wille.
 Ongietan sceal glēaw hæle hū gæstlic bið
 þonne eall þisse worulde wela wēste stondeð,
 75 swā nū missenlice geond þisne middangeard
 winde biwāune weallas stondaþ,
 hrīme bihrorene, hryðge þā ederas.
 Wōriað þā winsalo, waldend licgað
 drēame bidrorene, duguð eal gecrong,
 80 wlonc bi wealle. Sume wig fornōm,
 ferede in forðwege; sumne fugel oþbær
 ofer hēanne holm; sumne se hāra wulf
 dēaðe gedælde; sumne drēorighlēor
 in eorðscræfe eorl gehýdde.

71-2. I have expanded the translation to clarify what I believe these lines to mean.

THE WANDERER

Therefore I see no reason in the world
 Why my heart grows not dark, when I consider
 The lives of warriors, how they suddenly
 Have left their hall, the bold and noble thanes,
 Just as this earth and everything thereon
 Declines and weakens each and every day.
 Certainly no man may be wise before
 He's lived his share of winters in the world.
 A wise man must be patient, not too hasty
 In speech, or passionate, impetuous
 Or timid as a fighter, nor too anxious
 Or carefree or too covetous of wealth;
 Nor ever must he be too quick to boast
 Before he's gained experience of himself.
 A man should wait, before he makes a vow,
 Until in pride he truly can assess
 How, when a crisis comes, he will re-act.
 The wise must know how awesome it will be
 When all the wealth of earth stands desolate,
 As now in various parts throughout the world
 Stand wind-blown walls, frost-covered, ruined buildings.
 The wine-halls crumble; monarchs lifeless lie,
 Deprived of pleasures, all the doughty troop
 Dead by the wall; some battle carried off,
 Took from this world; one the dire bird removed
 Over the ocean deep; one the grey wolf
 Consigned to death; and one a tear-stained hero

THE WANDERER

85 Ƴpde swā þisne eardgeard ælda Scyppend
 of þæt burgwara breahtra læase
 eald enta geweorc idlu stōdon.
 Se þonne þisne wealsteal wise gepōhte
 and þis deorce lif dēope geondþenceð,
 90 frōd in ferðe feor oft gemon
 wælsleahta worn, and þās word ācwið:
 'Hwær cwōm mearg, hwær cwōm mago? Hwær cwōm
 māþpumgyfa?
 Hwær cwōm symbla gesetu? Hwær sindon seledrēamas?
 Ēalā beorht būne, ēalā byrnwiga,
 95 ēalā pēodnes þrym. Hū sēo þræg gewāt,
 genāp under nihthelm swā hēo nō wære.
 Stondeð nū on lāste lēofre duguþe
 weal wundrum hēah wyrmlīcum fāh.
 Eorlas fornōmon asca þrype,
 100 wāpen wælgifru, wyrd sēo mære,
 and þās stānhleoþu stormas cnyssað.
 Hrið hrēosende hrūsan bindeð,
 wintres wōma, þonne won cymeð,
 nīpeð nihtscūa, norþan onsendeð
 105 hrēo hæglfare hælēpum on andan.
 Eall is earfoðlic eorþan rice;
 onwendeð wyrda gesceaft weoruld under heofonum.
 Hēr bið feoh læne, hēr bið frēond læne,
 hēr bið mon læne, hēr bið mæg læne.
 110 Eal þis eorþan gesteal idel weorpeð.'
 Swā cwæð snottor on mōde, gesæt him sundor æt rūne.

87. *eald enta geweorc*. Large ancient buildings and ruins were often described as 'the works of giants', e.g. *Ruin*, l. 2, *Gnomic Verses*, l. 2. In this case the giants may be literally intended. J. A. Burrow reasons that since *stodon* is a preterite the sense of ll. 85-7 must all be in the past, and the only destruction of this *eardgeard* that could be meant is the Flood. The giants of *Genesis* vi. 4 were known to the Anglo-Saxons, and it was their *geweorc* that stood idle.

III. *æt rūne* omitted in translation. Its meaning is not clear; perhaps 'in meditation'.

THE WANDERER

Concealed from daylight in an earthy cave.
 Just so in days long past mankind's Creator
 Destroyed this earth, till lacking the gay sounds
 Of citizens the ancient works of giants
 Stood desolate. He who has wisely thought
 And carefully considered this creation
 And this dark life, experienced in spirit
 Has often pondered many massacres
 In far off ages, and might say these words:
 'Where is the horse now, where the hero gone?
 Where is the bounteous lord, and where the benches
 For feasting? Where are all the joys of hall?
 Alas for the bright cup, the armoured warrior,
 The glory of the prince. That time is over,
 Passed into night as it had never been.
 Stands now memorial to that dear band
 The splendid lofty wall, adorned with shapes
 Of serpents; but the strong blood-greedy spear
 And mighty destiny removed the heroes,
 And storms now strike against these stony slopes.
 The falling tempest binds in winter's vice
 The earth, and darkness comes with shades of night,
 And from the north fierce hail is felt to fall
 In malice against men. And all is hardship
 On earth, the immutable decree of fate
 Alters the world which lies beneath the heavens.
 Here property and friendship pass away,
 Here man himself and kinsmen pass away,
 And all this earthly structure comes to nought.'
 Thus spoke the thoughtful sage, he sat apart.

