

IX

Secular Poetry

Durham
Poem

The triumph of Christianity in England had literary effects which went beyond the composition of vernacular religious poems. The new faith, and the southern culture which came to the English with that faith, brought about great changes in the treatment of secular themes as well, and led to the use of themes not characteristic of the old native tradition. Such a theme is the *encomium urbis* exemplified in the *Durham Poem*,¹ a 20-line fragment in praise of the city of Durham. The fragment as we have it belongs to the early twelfth century, in all likelihood, but it may represent a revision of the earlier composition referred to in line 19 of the text.² The verses have little merit, but are worthy of mention as the only surviving Old English example of a type of poem familiar in classical antiquity.

Ruin

A contrasting theme, which we may call *de excidio urbis* (or *arcis*), is exemplified in *Ruin*,³ a poem of the Exeter Book. The poem is commonly printed in 48 or 49 lines; we cannot be sure of the number because of the defective state of folio 124. The loss of many words of the text makes interpretation harder, too, of course. The poet describes the decay and destruction of a city (or stronghold), and contrasts its present desolation with its presumable splendor in the past. This theme has obvious kinship to that of *Wanderer*, 73-105, and a Latin poem of the sixth century, the *De Excidio Thoringiae* of Venantius Fortunatus, begins in much the same vein.⁴ The *Ruin* poet's mention of hot baths has led many to identify with Bath the ruin described,⁵ but since the poem is of the nameless timeless kind we doubt that its author had in mind one site only: the ruin which he made his subject was (we think) a creation of his own, though in describing it he drew on his knowledge of actual ruins. His poem departs from the usual Old English pattern in that the reader or hearer must himself supply the obvious moral: all earthly things perish. But possibly the lost passage at the end was a moralizing one. We reckon the poem secular: Wyrð, not God,

¹ MS: Camb. Univ. Lib. H. 1. 27. Printed text and study: M. Schlauch, *JEGP*, XL (1941), 14-28.

² Line 20 in the text as printed in Krapp-Dobbie, VI, 27, where line 10 is divided into two lines.

³ See C. A. Hotchner, *Wessex and Old English Poetry* . . . (1939); for criticism of this unconvincing dissertation see Joan Blomfield, *MA*, IX (1940), 114-116 and S. J. Herben, *MLN*, LIX (1944), 72-74. The text is in N. Kershaw, *Anglo-Saxon and Norse Poems* (Cambridge, 1922).

⁴ So first A. Brandl, *Archiv*, CXXXIX (1919), 84.

⁵ Identification with Hadrian's Wall has been proposed by S. J. Herben; see *MLN*, LIV (1939), 37-39.

brought the ruin about (contrast *Wanderer*, 85). It does not follow, however, that the poet was a heathen. We believe that his Wyrd answers to the Fate of classical antiquity and that in attributing the destruction to Fate he was conforming to some classical literary model. We do not know when or where the poet flourished, but we do know from his poem that he had poetic power.

Of much interest are the 95 metrical riddles of the Exeter Book.⁶ Through *Riddles* loss of leaves and other damage to the MS the text of many of these riddles is defective. Most of the editors combine the 68th and 69th riddles, but in the MS they are clearly distinguished. On the other hand, the 2nd and 3rd riddles make one in the MS. The Exeter scribe recorded two versions of the 30th riddle, while the 35th riddle survives also in a Northumbrian version elsewhere recorded.⁷ The riddles vary in length from one line (No. 69) to over 100 lines (No. 40). In general they must be reckoned literary (not popular) compositions; they are done in the classical Old English poetic style. Two are translations of extant Latin originals: No. 35 translates Aldhelm's 33rd riddle, *Lorica*; No. 40, his 100th, *Creatura*. Several more go back, with varying degrees of probability, to Latin riddles in the collection that goes by the name of Symphosius.⁸ Many others may well have been based on specific Latin sources; certainly the composition of Latin riddles in verse had a vogue among English clerics in the seventh and eighth centuries, though most of these riddles have not come down to us.⁹ Not a few of the Old English riddles have poetic worth. We call attention to Lascelles Abercrombie's happy modernization of the eighth riddle.¹⁰ Other riddles give us examples of the *double entente* (No. 44), and one even incorporates a joke (No. 42). A certain dry humor marks the lines on the bookworm (No. 47):

A moth ate words. To me'that seemed
 an odd happening, when I found it out,
 that the crawling thing swallowed up the speech of a man,
 a thief in darkness [ate] noble discourse
 and its strong support [i.e., parchment], The thieving guest
 was none the wiser for swallowing those words.

Here (as in other cases) the riddle form was stretched to include something merely paradoxical, and even this only by identification of the ink-marks with the words they symbolize. Many of the riddles are in the first person, the speaker being the solution personified. The collection was formerly begun (as still in Tupper's edition) with the poem of 19 lines now

⁶ One of these, the 90th, is in Latin. Ed. F. Tupper, *The Riddles of the Exeter Book* (Boston, 1910); A. J. Wyatt, *Old English Riddles* (Boston, 1912).

⁷ In Leiden Univ. MS Voss 106; ed. A. H. Smith, *Three Northumbrian Poems* (1933).

⁸ See above, p. 14.

⁹ See above, p. 14. For discussion of other riddles see especially *MLR*, xxxi (1936), 545-547; *Neophilologus*, iv (1919), 258-262, xiii (1928), 293-296, xxvi (1941), 228-231, xxvii (1942), 220, xxix (1945), 126-127; xxxi (1947), 65-68; *Studia Neophilologica*, xiv G942), 67-70; *MLN*, LIV (1939), 259-262; *MA*, xv (1946), 48-54.

¹⁰ *Poems* (1930), p. 16.

known as *Eadwacer*. The so-called 60th riddle in all likelihood does not belong to the collection either, but makes the first section of the poem known as *Lover's* or *Husband's Message*. We know nothing of the authorship of the riddles, though they were presumably composed by clerics. We give the collection an eighth century dating, but not with certainty.

Love
Poems

Three love poems have come down to us in the Exeter Book: the poems *Eadwacer* and *Lover's Message* mentioned above, and a poem of 53 lines called *Wife's Lament* or *Complaint*.¹¹ Two of these, *Eadwacer* and *Wife's Lament*, purport to be by women. *Eadwacer* is one of the most obscure poems in the English language. We make no attempt to interpret it, but quote two passages remarkable for their power and beauty:¹²

I waited for my wanderer, my Wulf, hoping and fearing:
when it was rainy weather and I sat wretched, weeping;
when the doughty man drew me into his arms—
it was heaven, yes, but hateful too.

Wulf, my Wulf, waiting for thee
hath left me sick, 50 seldom hast thou come;
a starving mood, no stint of meat. (lines 9-15)

The
Wife's
Lament

The *Wife's Lament* likewise makes trouble for the interpreter, though here the difficulties are far less serious.¹³ The poem is in the first person throughout. The speaker is a woman who has lost her husband's favor and has been forced, by him, to live alone, in a cheerless wooded spot. She applies several uncomplimentary epithets to the house she lives in: *herh-eard* "heathenish abode," *eord-seraj* "hole in the ground, tomb, hovel," *eord-sele* "hut." Such terms of denunciation need not be taken too literally. Her unhappiness finds expression in the following passage (among others):

Fallen is this house: I am filled with yearning,
The dales are dim, the downs [i.e., hills] are high,
the bitter yards with briars are grown,
the seats are sorrowful. I am sick at heart,
he is so far from me. There are friends on earth,
lovers living that lie together,
while I, early and all alone,
walk under the oak tree, wander through these halls, (lines 29-36.)

She tries to console herself by reflecting that

it is the way of a young man to be woeful in mood,
hard in his heart's thought,... (lines 42-3)

¹¹ See R. Imelmann, *Forschungen zur ae. Poesie* (Berlin, 1920), pp. 1-314. The author includes also *Wanderer* and *Seafarer* in this investigation.

¹² The quotations from *Eadwacer* and *Wife's Lament* are taken, by permission, from K. Malone, *Ten Old English Poems* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1941).

¹³ Ed. N. Kershaw, in *Anglo-Saxon and Norse Poems* (Cambridge, 1922).

and by drawing a picture of such a man (her husband) himself alone and in misery, but she finds this picture not so consoling after all, and ends with the dismal saying,

hard is the lot
of one that longs for [one's] love in vain, (lines 52-3)

The lyricism of *Eadvacer* and the *Wife's Lament*, wholly secular though it be, has little in common with the personal poetry of native tradition, the poetry of the scop, and one is tempted to look to classical antiquity for models. Here Virgil's story of Dido comes at once to mind, while the pages of Ovid give us other analogues.¹⁴ We cannot take these classical tales for sources, but they may well have suggested a like literary treatment of native tales otherwise unknown to us. Imelmann sets the years 781-830 as the period within which these poems were composed.

The *Lover's Message* makes other difficulties.¹⁵ The MS text falls into *The* four clearly marked sections: of these the first (17 lines) and the third (13 Lover's lines) are intact; the second (11 to 13 lines) and the fourth (28 or 29 lines) *Message* are defective, because of a great hole in folio 123. The first section is usually but (we think) wrongly taken to be a separate poem, the so-called 60th riddle. In form, the *Lover's Message* is a speech, made by a stick of wood upon which a lover had cut (presumably in runes) a message to his lady. The stick explains how the man with his knife made it into a messenger, and then addresses the lady directly in that capacity (line 14), with mention of its journey to her from overseas, and with many pleas in the lover's behalf. The lady's answer is not given, but from the tone of the speaker we may infer that she said yes. The speech ends with a runic passage not altogether clear. The riddle (No. 30, second version) which immediately precedes *Lover's Message* in the MS likewise has a wooden object for speaker and speeches by inanimate objects are characteristic of the riddles, as we have seen. We remember, too, that a piece of wood (the Cross) made a speech in *Dream of the Rood*. Our poet seems to have taken this device and used it in his own way, with striking effect. His suitor gives us a foretaste, not so much of medieval as of modern love-poetry. The go-between, the emphasis on privacy, and the deferential tone remind one, it is true, of the later *service des dames*, while the setting is courtly enough, but the man proposes, and intends, marriage, not seduction, and he is the lady's equal, not her servant. The plain implication that the lady can do as she likes, even to the point of making a journey overseas to join her lover, gives to the poem a curiously modern touch. This touch would be removed, of course, if we took the lovers for man and wife, but the lover's pleas would then lose all point. The poem shows much literary merit, in spite of its mutila-

¹⁴ See Imelmann, pp. 188-307, and H. Reuschel, Paul u. Braune's *Beitrag zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache u. Lit.*, LXII (1938), 132-142.

¹⁵ Also known as the *Husband's Message*. Ed. N. Kershaw, in *Anglo-Saxon and Norse Poems* (Cambridge, 1922).

tion. It was composed not later than *c.* 950. We know nothing of its author or of his sources.

A different kind of plea is that made by the scribe who copied the last part of the text of the Old English translation of Bede's *History* recorded in CCCC 41, a MS commonly dated *c.* 1030. At the end of this text the copyist added a 10-line poem of his own, a plea to readers of rank, urging his claims to patronage.¹⁶ This versified advertisement for patrons he made as conspicuous as possible by writing every other line in red ink. Incidentally his verses show that he expected noble readers. We know of no other nation of western Europe which, in the first half of the eleventh century, could boast of a reading public that included laymen of noble rank.

A 17-line fragment of a poem in honor of Aidhelm (the famous English prelate and scholar) has come down in the tenth-century MS 326, CCCC. This poem is written in a curious mixture of English, Latin, and Greek not unsuited to its subject: Aidhelm had a weakness for showing off his learning. The anonymous poet probably wrote in Canterbury at a date not much earlier than that of the MS. The mixture of tongues in his poem reminds one of the charters, and differs from macaronic verse.¹⁷

The metrical writings of King Alfred will be taken up along with the prose in which they are imbedded.

Beowulf

The influence of southern culture on English secular poetry has shown itself chiefly, so far, in the choice and treatment of subject-matter, but two of the heroic poems that survive show marked influence in other ways as well. One of these poems, *Waldere*,TM has come down in a state so fragmentary that we must set it aside for the moment. The other, however, *Beowulf*,TM with its 3182 lines, gives us a broader basis for judgment. This famous poem, the chief literary monument of the Old English period, is the fourth article in the Nowell codex (see above, p. 67). The MS text is divided into a prologue and 43 fits. We look first at the theme of the poem. For this the poet turned to the heroic age of the Germanic peoples; more precisely, to heroes of the fifth and sixth centuries. And he chose for his setting Scandinavia, that motherland (or *vagina nationum*, as Jordanes puts it) from which so many Germanic tribes, the English among them, had gone forth down the years.²⁰ The poem thus celebrated, not contemporary deeds of heroism, but events of a past already remote, already glorified by a tradition centuries old. This tradition in its beginnings made part of the cultural baggage which the Germanic settlers in Britain brought with 1

¹⁶ Text in Krapp-Dobbie, vi, 113.

¹⁷ Text in Krapp-Dobbie, vi, 97-98.

¹⁸ Ed. F. Norman (1933). See also *MA*, x (1941), 155-158.

¹⁹ Facsimile ed.: J. Zupitza, *EETS*, 77 (London, 1882). Best printed editions: in English, I. F. Klaeber (Boston, 1922; 3ed. 1936); in German, E. von Schaubert (Paderborn, 1940), also referred to as 15th ed. of Heyne-Schiöcking's *Beowulf*. Most comprehensive study: R. W. Chambers, *Beowulf, An Introduction ...* (Cambridge, 1921; 2ed. 1932). See also W. W. Lawrence, *Beowulf and Epic Tradition* (Cambridge, Mass., 1928) and H. Schneider, *Das germanische Epos* (Tübingen, 1936). A good recent verse translation is that of C. W. Kennedy (Princeton, 1940).

²⁰ See K. Malone, in *Namn och Bygd*, xxu (1934), 41, 51.

them from Sleswick. It had taken a shape specifically English by the eighth century, when in all likelihood *Beowulf* was composed.²¹ In drawing from it, the poet followed his own needs, not modern taste; too many critics have scolded him for this.²² The action of the poem falls into two main parts. In part one, the hero Beowulf, then young, goes from his homeland to Heorot, the hall of King Hrothgar of the Danes, in order to cleanse it of Grendel, a troll who for years had haunted it at night; he overcomes Grendel singlehanded and afterwards slays Grendel's mother, who sought to avenge her son. In part two, the hero, now grown old, goes out to defend his own kingdom of Geatland against the ravages of a dragon; with the help of a faithful young kinsman he kills the dragon but himself falls in the fight. These idealized folk-tales are not told in isolation, or for their own sakes; they make part of an elaborate complex of fact and fable, matters of pith and moment, involving the fortunes of three Scandinavian kingdoms, those of the Geats, the Danes, and the Swedes, over a period of several generations. The poet has painted a vast canvas. And in glorifying his hero he has not forgotten to glorify as well the heathen Germanic courtly culture of which that hero was the flower. He gives us a spiritualized picture of the Germanic heroic age, an age the memory of which the English of the poet's day cherished as their very own. We believe that *Beowulf* was meant to serve a purpose not unlike that which the *Aeneid* of Virgil served: each poem exalted a past which by tradition or fiction belonged to the cultural heritage of the poet's nation. In each poem, moreover, this exaltation of the past took place under the influence of a foreign culture: pagan Greece in the *Aeneid*, Christian Rome in *Beowulf*. The English poet accordingly pictures a society heathen and heroic, but strongly colored by Christian ideals of thought and deed. In particular, the hero is made as Christ-like as the setting would permit: highminded and gentle, he fights chiefly against monstrous embodiments of the forces of evil, and in the end lays down his life for his people. But the Christianity known to the poet had itself been strongly colored by the culture of classical antiquity. Latin was the language of the Church in Old England, and Roman poets were read and studied by learned clerics like the author of *Beowulf*. We believe that the English poet knew the *Aeneid* and was influenced by it in designing and composing his own poem.²³ Alongside this influence, which made for epic breadth and leisure, we put the influence of English religious poems like *Genesis*, likewise marked by length and fullness in their narrative art. The *Beowulf* poet certainly showed originality when, in celebrating a secular hero of the Germanic past, he did not compose a song after the manner traditional to the scop (who before him had monopolized

²¹ A recent discussion of the date of *Beowulf* is that of D. Whitelock, *The Audience of Beowulf* (Oxford, 1951), pp. 22-29. See also H. M. Flasdieck, *Anglia*, LXIX (1950), 169-171.

²² See J. R. R. Tolkien, *Proc. Brit. Acad.*, xxii (1936), 245-285 and K. Malone, *RES*, xvn (1941), 129-138. See also J. R. Hulbert, *MP*, XLIV (1946), 65-75.

²³ See T. B. Haber, *A Comparative Study of the Beowulf and the Aeneid* (Princeton, 1931). See also A. Brandl, *Archiv, cuxxi* (1937) 165-173.

such themes), but used, instead, an elaborate, sophisticated narrative form reminiscent of the *JEneid*. In doing so, however, he was only carrying into the secular field a process of amplification and complication which, as we have seen, had already set in among the composers of English religious verse.

More striking is the originality of *Beowulf* in structure. The two main parts balance each other admirably, exemplifying and contrasting as they do the heroic life in youth and age. By treating in full two chapters only of Beowulf's career, the poet makes his tale marvelously simple, at bottom. The elaboration, which Grundtvig has aptly likened to the multitudinous embellishments of a Gothic cathedral, not only lends richness and variety to the action, but also makes the hero and his deeds part of the age in which he and they are set. Since the scene is laid in Scandinavia, most of the allusions and episodes deal with Scandinavian history and story, but other quarters of Germania are brought into the picture as well. Eormenric and Hama stand for the east. The allusions to the fall of Hygelac, and the Finn and Ingeld episodes, serve to link north and west. The association of Sigemund with Heremod, and the (rather artificial) connection of both with Beowulf himself, have a like function, while Offa, the representative of the Angles (the poet's own tribe), though introduced by a *tour de force*, well symbolizes the unity of ancient Germania: in after years both English and Danes claimed him for their own. In these and other ways the poet rises above mere story-telling; he brings before us a whole world, the heroic age of his forefathers and ours. But the greatness of *Beowulf* lies largely if not chiefly in its wording, and here the poet is no innovator; he is rather the master of a traditional style, a mode already old in his day. In the words of M. B. Ruud,^{24 25} *Beowulf* has

a magnificence of language which leaves critic and translator helpless. Indeed, if the poem has a weakness as a work of art, it lies in this all-pervasive artistry. *Beowulf* seldom pierces one with a stab of eloquence straight from a heart on fire—as lesser poems do, even *Maldony* it carries one along on a great golden stream of poetic rhetoric. ___ It is a great literary tradition at its finest flowering. ... *Beowulf* may not be one of the half-dozen great poems of the world—I confess I do not know—but for sheer *style*, there are not many works to be put above it.

Waldere

With *Beowulf* we take the two *Waldere* fragments (of 32 and 31 lines respectively). These are recorded on two pieces of vellum, all that is left of an English MS of the late tenth century (167b, Royal library, Copenhagen). The verses are done in a style so broad and leisurely that they presumably made part of a long poem (one of 1000 lines or more, perhaps)²⁶ in which was celebrated the fight between the hero Waldere and a band of Burgundians led by King Guthere. This fight is known to us from other

²⁴ *MLQ*, 11 (1941). 138-139.

²⁵ For a different view, see F. P. Magoun, *MLN*, LIX (1944). 498-499.

sources, notably the tenth-century Latin poem *Waltharius*²⁶ from which we learn that it was a fight of one against twelve, not counting the spectator Hagen (though he too was finally drawn in). In *Waldere* as in *Beowulf* the theme is secular, the treatment involved and sophisticated, bookish rather than popular. Both poems, moreover, celebrate events of the Germanic heroic age. The fragments are long enough to reveal that JPaWere lacks the greatness of *Beowulf*. Its clerical composer, however, had considerable skill in versification, and though he used a German source he was steeped in traditional English poetry sacred and profane. In losing *Waldere* we lost a good poem and a stirring tale.

²⁶ For an earlier date, see K. Strecker, in *Deutsches Archiv für Geschichte des Mittelalters*, iv (1941), 355-381. Ed. K. Strecker, *Ekkhard's Waltharius* (Berlin, 1924). Translated by H. M. Smyser and F. P. Magoun, Jr., in *Connecticut College Monograph No. 1* (Baltimore, 1941), pp. m-145.