

METAMORPHOSES

ROGER LASS

TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION TO *THE SEAFARER*

This is a poem out of a lost world, and my aim is make it accessible to people in this one, keeping as much of its otherness as I can, both in content and language. The title is a late invention; Old English poems did not normally have titles (and were anonymous). This, like almost all the great poems of the Anglo-Saxon period, exists in a unique copy, in this case in a manuscript of about 970, *The Exeter Book*, one of the four great compilations that contain almost all the existing OE verse. The language is a special 'poetic dialect', a kind of koine containing West Saxon (roughly Thames Valley and Southwest) and Anglian (Midlands) vocabulary and grammar. Where the poem itself comes from is unknowable, but there are Welsh features such as the cuckoo as the bird of ill omen that suggest the Southwest Midlands (perhaps Shropshire), or at least a poet from elsewhere who knew the Welsh tradition.

What I've produced here is very different (though partly similar in feeling) from Ezra Pound's famous version or 'interpretation' of 1911 (see Wikipedia, *The Seafarer*). For one thing it's accurate. Pound's is full of mistranslations and grammatical mistakes, and what in some places look like guesses on the basis of Modern English words with similar sound; e.g. in the first line he translates *wreccan* as 'reckon', but it has no such meaning in Old English and here can only mean 'utter'. Maybe he was helped out by a student with a year of Old English behind him, but of course I can't know (it is a difficult text.) Even worse is the fact that Pound misrepresents the poem completely by leaving out the last 30 or so lines, where the poem changes tone and becomes homiletic, moralistic (in both pagan and Christian modes) and ends with a prayer. The last word is 'Amen'. Pound essentially presents what he likes and does not understand the genre, which is quite formal, starting with the speaker's account of his misery, then a section displaying the decay of the world and the loss of great men and nobility, followed by a moral homily, an evocation of fear at the final destruction of the world, and a prayer for salvation. The poem looks at first like a secular lyric (hence the traditional name 'elegy for this genre), but becomes profoundly religious and moralistic and consolatory at the end, echoing the virtues of both the Old Germanic and Christian worlds, even in the terms used for God. This may seem a strange mixture, but that's the way they

did it. I said this is a lost world. Pound presents a purely secular poem solely about human experience; the actual work is a religious poem as well, or better, to give a name to the way the two elements interlace in most OE poetry, religio-secular.

Ah yes, you ought to visualise a small open boat in winter sailing along the North Sea coast, unclear where. The English didn't cross the water much like the Norse, but hugged the shore. But the North Sea coast (somehow I visualise Northumberland up near Lindisfarne) can be pretty terrifying and bleak even at the foot of the cliffs.

The speaker appears to be a retainer who for some reason has lost his lord (perhaps he fell in battle) and is without a community of kinsmen to live in. This is Old Germanic life, where the equivalent of a warlord would have a group of retainers who fought for him, and whom he parted the spoils of battle among, and was often called 'ring-giver', referring to bracelets and other gold ornaments. The story, repeated over and over in Norse and German and Old English literature, and already described in the 1st century AD by the Roman historian Tacitus, is that this was the fundamental structure of late antique Germanic society, organised by clans and living in enclosed camps at the foot of hills for protection. The word I render as 'men's dwellings' is *burgum*, dative plural of a word that primarily means hill, but can mean village protected by a fortified hill, and later became the general Germanic word for city (cf. Hamburg, Augsburg). A man who has lost his lord and protector, and his kinsmen, is a permanent exile, but with certain strange consolations. This life was mostly gone by the time this poem was written, but it was a central literary topos, perhaps a kind of nostalgia for the wildness and tragedy and nobility of the old pagan world in people physically but sometimes only partly culturally living in a Christian one. This life undoubtedly persisted in obscure places in the hill country after the Roman invasions, and through the Viking attacks of the 8th century. At any rate this style of life is also described and the same language used in purely Christian religious poems (e.g. saints' lives, the story of St Helena finding the True Cross).

The verse is alliterative, and I do not succeed in capturing that except in bits. But I am more or less keeping the rhythm: it's basically a four-beat line consisting of two half-lines (also called verses or hemistiches) with as many weak syllables as necessary, no rhyme, tied together by alliteration, and the use of synonymous names for the same thing (the cuckoo, summer's guardian, the lone-flyer). The word order here is a bit weird at times, because I'm trying to capture the very un-

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English way the poet manages topics and what he emphasises.

I've used very little punctuation, because the MS, following normal OE practice, is virtually unpunctuated except for an occasional 'punctus' (raised full stop) mainly marking metrical units, barely if at all noting syntax. The poem is written in prose format like all pre-Middle English poetry, but the lines tell you what they are if you know the meter. I don't have the lineation available, so I've divided it by line the way modern editions (unfortunately) do.

Some compounds like *truesong* that seem odd (why not *true song*?) are deliberate because that's what the poet chose: both were available in Old English, and as in Modern English form different metrical feet (trochaic vs iambic). The scribe does not capitalise except to introduce a thematically new section (not even the names of deities), but I will capitalise where I have to for sense (e.g. to distinguish a secular lord from God, for which the same word could be used) or convention. The poem is not a holograph and is probably around a century (perhaps a bit less) older than the copy we have. There is no surviving 'original', as there rarely is, so the copying scribe and the original creator are for all practical purposes the same.

Some comments on odd words or concepts

'Narrow nightwatches'. In OE *nearu* also had the sense 'constricted', 'anxious' (cf. *anxious*, *Angst* with the Latin root meaning 'constricted').

'Edge' (*ecg*) is a common OE synecdoche for 'sword'.

The significance of praise after death is a central Old Germanic motif: the Old Icelandic *Hávamál* ('Sayings of the High One' = Odinn) says *Deyr fé, / deyr frændr, / deyr sjalvrit sama: / einn ek veit at aldri deyr / dómr af dauðan hvern* (Riches perish, friends perish, the soul/itself perishes; I know one thing that never dies, the fame of dead men). And the last word in the funeral panegyric that ends the OE *Beowulf* is that he was of all men *lofgeornost* 'most eager for praise', the consummate virtue.

There are many words for religious concepts like 'God' and 'Fate' which

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have very specific meanings. Thus God is often in my translation 'The Measurer', which is OE *meotud*, derived from the root of the verb *metan* 'to measure'. Another used may seem odd, but it has resonances which I think support using it. This is *Weird*, which is fate or destiny in the pagan sense, here used for the Christian God. I've kept it because of familiar survivals like 'to dree one's weird' in old ballads or ballad-imitations, and 'the Weird Sisters'.

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THE SEAFARER

Translated from the Old English by Roger Lass

for k

Mæg ic be me sylfum soðgied wrecan,
siþas secgan, hu ic geswincdagum
earfoðhwile oft þrowade,
bitre breostceare gebiden hæbbe,
gecunnad in ceole cearselda fela,
atol yþa gewealc, þær mec oft bigeat
nearo nihtwaco æt nacan stefnan,
þonne he be clifum cnossað. Calde geþrunge
wæron mine fet, forste gebunden,
caldum clommum, þær þa ceare seofedun
hat ymb heortan; hungor innan slat
merewerges mod. þæt se mon ne wat
þe him on foldan fægrost limpeð,
hu ic earmcearig iscealdne sæ
winter wunade wræccan lastum,
winemægum bidroren,
bihongen hrimgicelum; hægl scurum fleag.
þær ic ne gehyrde butan hlimman sæ,
iscaldne wæg. Hwilum ylfete song
dyde ic me to gomene, ganetes hleoþor
ond huilpan sweg fore hleahtor weras,
mæw singende fore medodrince.
Stormas þær stanclifu beotan, þær him stearn oncwæð
isigfeþera; ful oft þæt earn bigeal,
urigfeþra; ne ænig hleomæga
feasceaftig ferð frefran meahte.
Forþon him gelyfeð lyt, se þe ah lifes wyn
gebiden in burgum, bealosiþa hwon,
wlonc ond wingal, hu ic werig oft
in brimlade bidan sceolde.
Nap nihtscua, norþan sniwde,
hrim hrusan bond, hægl feol on eorþan,
cornas caldast. Forþon cnyssað nu
heortan geþohtas, þæt ic hean streamas,
sealtyþa gelac sylf cunnige;

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Let me of myself truesong utter
Tell of journeys, how I days of labour,
Times of sorrow often suffered
Bitter breast-care have endured
Known on shipboard many care-times
Terrible wave-rolling where often came to me
Narrow nightwatches at the ship's prow
When it dashes by the cliffs. Constricted by cold
Were my feet, frost-bound
In icy chains where the cares lamented
Hot round my heart; hunger cut from within
The sea-weary one's spirit. That the man knows not
To whom on earth fair life is given,
How I wretched-sorrowful the ice-cold sea
Dwelt on in winter, the paths of exile,
Of beloved kinsmen deprived
Hung round with icicles; hail flew in showers.
There I heard nothing but the roaring sea
The ice-cold path. Sometimes the swan's song
I took as my pleasure, the gannet's sound
And the curlew's cry for the laughter of men,
The singing gull for the drinking of mead.
Storms there beat the stone-cliffs where the tern cried
Icy-feathered; full oft the eagle screamed
Dewy-feathered; no companions
The desolate spirit could console.
Wherefore he cannot believe who life's joy
Has had in men's dwellings, few baleful times,
Rich and wine-flushed, how I weary often
On the sea-path had to endure.
Night-shadow darkened, it snowed from the north,
Frost bound the ground, hail fell on earth,
Coldest of corns. Therefore now sadden
The thoughts of my heart, since I the high streams,
The play of the salt seas must know myself,

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monað modes lust mæla gehwylce
ferð to feran, þæt ic feor heonan
elþeodigra eard gesece.
Forþon nis þæs modwlanc mon ofer eorþan,
ne his gifena þæs god, ne in geogube to þæs hwæt,
ne in his dædum to þæs deor, ne him his dryhten to þæs hold,
þæt he a his sæfore sorge næbbe,
to hwon hine dryhten gedon wille.
Ne biþ him to hearpan hyge ne to hringþege,
ne to wife wyn ne to worulde hyht,
ne ymbe owiht elles, nefne ymb yða gewealc,
ac a hafað longunge se þe on lagu fundað.
Bearwas blostmum nimað, byrig fægriað,
wongas wlitigað, woruld onetteð;
ealle þa gemoniað modes fusne
sefan to siþe, þam þe swa þenceð
on flodwegas feor gewitan.
Swylce geac monað geomran reorde,
singeð sumeres weard, sorge beodeð
bitter in breosthord. þæt se beorn ne wat,
esteadig secg, hwæt þa sume dreogað
þe þa wræclastas widost lecgað.
Forþon nu min hyge hweorfeð ofer hreþerlocan,
min modsefa mid mereflode
ofer hwæles eþel hweorfeð wide,
eorþan sceatas, cymeð eft to me
gifre ond grædig, gielleð anfloga,
hweteð on hwælweg hreþer unwearnum
ofer holma gelagu. Forþon me hatran sind
dryhtnes dreamas þonne þis deade lif,
læne on londe. Ic gelyfe no
þæt him eorðwelan ece stondað.
Simle þreora sum þinga gehwylce,
ær his tid aga, to tweon weorþeð;
adl oþþe ylde oþþe ecghete
fægum fromweardum feorh oðþringeð.
Forþon þæt bið eorla gehwam æftercweþendra
lof lifgendra lastworda betst,
þæt he gewyrce, ær he on weg scyle,
fremum on foldan wið feonda niþ,

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The heart's joy diminishes every time
I think of travel, that I far from here
Strangers' lands must seek.
There is no such mindproud man over earth,
Nor so good of his gifts nor so brave in youth
Nor so fierce in his deeds, nor his lord so kind to him
That he does not always fear for his sea-faring,
What The Lord will wish to do to him.
He thinks not of harp-sound, the giving of gifts,
Nor the joy of women nor hope of the world
Nor of anything else but the rolling of the waves,
But he always suffers longing who goes on the waters.
Groves burst into blossom, the city grows fair
Meadows grow lovely, the world quickens;
All this urges the eager-hearted one's
Heart to the journey, his who intends
On the flood-ways far to venture.
So the cuckoo urges with a sorrowful voice,
Summer's guard sings, augurs sorrow
Bitter in breastboard. That the man knows not
The soft-happy one, what they endure
Who the paths of exile widest tread.
Wherefore now my spirit journeys out over heart-coffer
My mind-heart amidst the sea-flood
Over the whale's country wanders wide,
The earth's expanses, comes back to me
Avid and greedy; the lone-flyer cries,
Whets on the whale-way the heart irresistibly,
Over the gatherings of the waters, because to me fiercer are
God's joys than this fleeting dead life
Brief on land. I do not believe
That the world's weal will stand forever.
Always for every man one of three things
Before his final day stands in doubt:
Sickness or old age or edge-hate
From the doomed departing will wrest the soul.
Wherefore to every noble the best last words
Are the praise of those living after him,
That he accomplish before he departs
Great acts on earth against enemies' malice

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deorum dædum deofle togeanes,
 þæt hine ælda bearn æfter hergen,
 ond his lof siþþan lifge mid englum
 awa to ealdre, ecan lifes blæd,
 dream mid dugeþum. Dagas sind gewitene,
 ealle onmedlan eorþan rices;
 næron nu cyningas ne caseras
 ne goldgiefan swylce iu wæron,
 þonne hi mæst mid him mærþa gefremedon
 ond on dryhtlicestum dome lifdon.
 Gedroren is þeos duguð eal, dreamas sind gewitene,
 wuniað þa wacran ond þas woruld healdaþ,
 brucað þurh bisgo. Blæd is gehnæged,
 eorþan indryhto ealdað ond searað,
 swa nu monna gehwylc geond middangeard.
 Ylde him on fareð, onsyn blacað,
 gomelfeax gnornað, wat his iuwine,
 æþelinga bearn, eorþan forgiefene.
 Ne mæg him þonne se flæschoma, þonne him þæt feorg losað,
 ne swete forswelgan ne sar gefelan,
 ne hond onhreran ne mid hyge þencan.
 þeah þe græf wille golde stregan
 broþor his geborenum, byrgan be deadum,
 maþmum mislicum þæt hine mid wille,
 ne mæg þære sawle þe biþ synna ful
 gold to geoce for godes egsan,
 þonne he hit ær hydeð þenden he her leofað.
 Micel biþ se meotudes egsa, forþon hi seo molde oncyrrreð;
 se gestapelade stiþe grundas,
 eorþan sceatas ond uprodor.
 Dol biþ se þe him his dryhten ne ondrædeþ; cymeð him se deað un-
 þinged.
 Eadig bið se þe eaþmod leofaþ; cymeð him seo ar of heofonum,
 meotod him þæt mod gestapelað, forþon he in his meahthe gelyfeð.
 Stieran mon sceal strongum mode, ond þæt on stapelum healdan,
 ond gewis werum, wisum clæne,
 scyle monna gehwylc mid gemete healdan
 wiþ leofne ond wið laþne bealo,
 þeah þe he hine wille fyres fulne
 oþþe on bæle forbærnedne

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Brave deeds against the devil
So that men's children shall afterwards praise him
And his fame afterwards live with the angels
Always for ever, eternal life's glory,
Joy among the host. Days are departed,
All the pomp of the kingdom of earth;
There are no longer kings or Caesars
Nor goldgivers as there once were,
When they did most glorious deeds
And lived in the noblest renown.
Fallen are the chivalry, joys are departed
The weak remain and hold the world,
Enjoy it through toil. Glory is humbled,
The earth's nobility ages and grows sere
As now every man throughout middle-earth,
Old age overtakes him, his face grows pale,
The hoary-locked mourns, remembers his former friend,
Nobleman's child given to earth.
Nor may then the flesh-cover when the soul loosens
Neither sweet swallow nor pain feel
Nor move his hand nor think with his mind.
Though the grave will strew with gold
Brother for his brother, bury with the dead
Glorious treasures, that goes not with him;
Nor may the soul that is full of sin
Have gold for protection against God's terror
Though he may hide it while he lives here.
Great will be the Measurer's terror because he shakes the world
He who established the firm grounds.
Foolish is he who does not dread his Lord: death will come to him
unexpected.
Blessed is he who mild-minded lives, grace shall come to him from
heaven.
The Measurer will make firm his mind, because he in his might be-
lieves.
A man must live with a strong mind, and hold it firmly
And be true to his pledges, clean in his living.
Every man must hold himself with fit measure
Against loved and against loath [lacuna] bale
Though he may not wish filled with fire

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his geworhtne wine. Wyrð biþ swiþre,
meotud meahþigra þonne ænges monnes gehygd.
Uton we hycgan hwær we ham agen,
ond þonne geþencan hu we þider cumen,
ond we þonne eac tilien, þæt we to moten
in þa ecan eadignesse,
þær is lif gelong in lufan dryhtnes,
hyht in heofonum. þæs sy þam halgan þonc,
þæt he usic geweorþade, wuldres ealdor,
ece dryhten, in ealle tid.
Amen.

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Or in the flame burnt to nothing
The friend he has made, Weird will be stronger,
The Measurer mightier than any man's imagining.
Let us decide where we shall have our home.
And then think how we might come thither;
And let us also labour that we may go there
In the eternal blessedness
Where the source of life is in love of the Lord
Hope in heavens. Let the Holy One be thanked for this,
That he has honoured us, glory's Elder,
Eternal Lord for all time.

Amen.