

Summary of Lectures on *The Wanderer and the Dream of the Rood*, September 8,
2014

KEYWORDS: ELEGY, UBI SUNT, HALL, NATURE, ALLITERATION,
TRANSLATION, REMEDIATION

We looked at two Old English poems that reflect on the transitory nature of human life; they are similar in sharing the elegiac air common to so much Old English poetry, but different in the degree to which Christianity, as a solution to human loss and morality, is integrated into the poems

Both are found in 10th-century manuscripts that are collections of Old English poetic material of various kinds; *The Wanderer* is found in the Exeter Book, and *The Dream of the Rood* is found in the Vercelli Book (you won't be tested on these names: I'm including them here just because I think they're interesting!)

The speaker in *The Wanderer* is an exile because his lord is dead: in the poem, he reflects on the joys of the past, and contrasts them to the loneliness of the present

The framing of his lament suggests that a wise man will reflect on the transitory nature of human life in terms that might be Christian: we talked about the different ways translators treat the word *metud* (Measurer) at the beginning of the poem, and the clear reference to a Father in heaven at the end

But we also talked about the focus on *wyrd* and on traditional heroic-age elements in the central part of the poem

The hall is central to the speaker's sense of loss: it was a place of warmth, companionship, and comfort, in contrast to the harsh, wintry world in which he now moves

Nature is not seen as beautiful or desirable, but as a hostile contrast to the now-lost joys of the hall

The lament for what is lost is expressed in terms of the *ubi sunt* motif (literally, "where are"): we looked at the lines J. R. R. Tolkien borrowed for his *Lord of the Rings*, and I talked about how the alliteration characteristic of Old English poetry serves to connect the list of things lost; repetition of the phrases "Hwær cwom" (where are) and "Eala" (Alas) underlines the idea of loss:

Hwær cwom mearg? Hwær cwom mago? Hwær cwom mabpungyfa?
Hwær cwom symbla gesetu? Hwær sindon seledreamas?
Eala beorht bune! Eala byrnwiga!
Eala þeodnes þrym!

We talked about Christianity being presented as an answer to the loss lamented in poems like these: I showed you a passage from Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica* of c. 731, describing the conversion of the Saxon King Edwin:

Another of the king's chief men agreed with this advice and with these wise words and he added, "This is how the present life of man of earth, King, appears to me in comparison with that time which is unknown to us. You are sitting feasting with your ealdormen and thegns in winter time; the fire is burning on the hearth in the middle of the hall and all is warm, while outside the wintry storms of rain and snow are raging; and a sparrow flies swiftly through the hall. It enters in at one door and quickly flies out through the other. For the few moments it is inside, the storm and wintry tempest cannot touch it, but after the briefest moment of calm, it flits from your sight, out of the wintry storm and into it again. So this life of man appears but for a moment; what follows or indeed what went before, we know not at all. If this new doctrine brings us more certain information, it seems right that we should accept it."

We talked about the contrast between the hall and the hostile natural world in this passage as a culturally-appropriate way to convey what the speakers felt Christianity had to offer

We then turned to *The Dream of the Rood*, which is an explicitly Christian poem from the ground up, but which is also thoroughly adapted to its cultural context

It begins, as *Beowulf* does, with the word "Hwaet" – a demand for attention, probably originating in oral poetic culture

The speaker has a vision in which the cross (the "rood") speaks to him and describes the crucifixion of Christ

Christ is depicted as a warrior (rather than as a patient sufferer): the words used to describe him include hero, warrior, king, lord, and he is repeatedly described as strong and resolute; Christ triumphs over the Cross in the same way a warrior like Beowulf triumphs over his enemies

As in *The Wanderer*, the speaker is alone, and laments the loss that is part of the human condition, but the Christian tenor of the poem allows him to imagine a new hall filled with warmth and companionship, this time with Christ in heaven

I suggested that the description of Heaven, with the repeated phrase "there is" in the lists of the joys to be found there, is an explicit answer to the loss expressed by the elegiac phrase "where are"

We also talked about how *The Dream of the Rood* can be seen as an example of **remediation**, as there is a version of part of it, carved in runic letters, on the Ruthwell Cross, a stone preaching cross; we talked about how the cross literally materializes the poem

More non-testable but interesting material: I told you about runes, a Germanic lettering system (the alphabets are often called futhork or futharc) used in northern Europe before (and for a time alongside) the Roman alphabet: J. R. R. Tolkien used one common runic alphabet in *The Hobbit*