I don't know why," expands the theme from one man to all human beings in a world wasted by war and time. He derives such cold comfort as he can from asking the old question, "Where are they now, who were once so glad in the mead-hall?"

The Wanderer is preserved only in the Exeter Book, a manuscript dating to about 975 (although the poem may be much earlier), which contains the largest surviving collection of Anglo-Saxon poetry.

The Wanderer[1]

"Often the lone-dweller[2] longs for relief,
the Almighty's mercy, though melancholy,
his hands turning time and again
the ocean's currents, the ice-cold seas,
following paths of exile. Fate is firmly set."
So spoke the Wanderer,[3] weary of hardships,
cruel combats, the death of kinsmen.
"Often alone, always at daybreak
I must lament my cares; not one remains alive
to whom I could utter the thoughts in my heart,
tell him my sorrows. In truth, I know that
for any eorl[4] an excellent virtue
is to lock tight the treasure chest
within one's heart, howsoever he may think.
A downcast heart won't defy destiny,
nor the sad spirit give sustenance.
And therefore those who thirst for fame
often bind fast their breast chamber.
"So I must hold in the thoughts of my heart—
though often wretched, bereft of my homeland,
far from kinfolk— bind them with fetters,
since in days long past with darkness of earth
I covered my gold-friend,[5] and I fared from there
over the waves' bed, winter-weary,
longing for a hall and a lord of rings,
where near or far I might find one
in the mead-hall remembering me and my kin,
or else show favor to a friendless man,
requite me with comfort. One acquainted with pain
understands how cruel a traveling companion
sorrow is for someone with few friends at his side.
Exile attends him, not twisted gold rings,
Heart-freezing frost, not fruits of the earth.
He recalls tablemates and treasure distributed,

1. The translation by Alfred David is based on *Eight Old English Poems*, 3rd ed., edited by John C. Pope, revised by R. D. Fulk. The translation is also indebted to comments by Professor Fulk.
2. Old English *an-haga* = one + hedge, enclosure—i.e., one who dwells alone in some sort of confinement.
3. Old English *eard-stapa* = earth + treader. The modern title—there is no title in the manuscript—derives from this compound noun.
4. *Eorl* = warrior. Only later did the Old English word come to designate a member of the British nobility.
5. Old English *gold-wine* = gold-friend, one of the many formulas applied to the lord, here in his role as dispenser of treasure to his retainers.

how from the first his friend and lord
helped him to the feast. That happy time is no more.
"This, indeed, anyone forced to forgo for long
the beloved counsel of his lord knows well.
Often when sorrow and sleep together
bind the poor lone-dweller in their embrace,
he dreams he clasps and that he kisses
his liege-lord again, lays head and hands
on the lord's knees as he did long ago,
enjoyed the gift-giving in days gone by.
Then the warrior, friendless, awakens again,
sees before him the fallow waves,
seabirds on the water spreading their wings,
snow and hail falling and sleet as well.
Then the heart's wounds grow heavier,
sadness for dear ones. Sorrow returns.
Then through his mind pass memories of kinsmen—
joyfully he greets them, eagerly gazes—
his fellow warriors, the floating spirits,
fade on their way. They fail to bring
much familiar talk —trouble is renewed—
for any man who must often send
his weary spirit over the waves' bed.
"Therefore I don't know why my woeful heart
should not wax dark in this wide world
when I look back on the life of eorls,
how quickly they quit the mead-hall's floor,
brave young men. So this middle-earth
from day to day dwindles and fails;
therefore no one is wise without his share of winters
in the world's kingdom. A wise man must be patient,
not too hot of heart nor hasty of speech,
not reluctant to fight nor too reckless,
not too timid nor too glad, not too greedy,
and never eager to commit until he can be sure.
A man should hold back his boast until
that time has come when he truly knows
to direct his heart on the right path.
"A wise man must know the misery of that time
when the world's wealth shall all stand waste,
just as in our own day all over middle-earth
walls are standing wind-swept and wasted,
downed by frost, and dwellings covered with snow.
The mead-hall crumbles, its master lies dead,
bereft of pleasures, all the warrior-band[6] perished,
boldly by the wall. Battle took some,
bore them away; a bird carried one
above the high waves; the gray wolf took another,
divided him with death; dreary-spirited

6. Old English *duguth*=generally something that affords benefit or advantage, but here it specifically applies to a band of warriors.

an eorl buried another in an earthen pit.
"Mankind's Creator laid waste this middle-earth
till the clamor of city-dwellers ceased to be heard
and ancient works of giants stood empty.
He who wisely contemplates this wall-stead,
and considers deeply the darkness of this life,
mature in years, remembers many
bloody battlegrounds and so begins:
'Where did the steed go? Where the young warrior? Where the treasure-giver?
Where the seats of fellowship? Where the hall's festivity?
Alas bright beaker! Alas burnished warrior!
Alas pride of princes! How the time has passed,
gone under night-helm as if it never was!
A towering wall, traced with serpent shapes,[7]
endures instead of the dear warrior-band.
Strength of ash-spears destroyed warriors,
slaughter-greedy weapons, overwhelming fate,
and storms beat against these stone-faced cliffs,
snow descending seals up the ground,
drumming of winter when darkness falls,
night shadows darken, from the north send down
fierce hail-showers in hatred of men.
All is wretchedness in the realm of earth;
fate's work lays low the world under heaven.
Here wealth is fleeting, here friend is fleeting,
here family is fleeting, here humankind is fleeting.
All this resting-place Earth shall become empty.'"
So said the wise man as he sat in meditation.
A good man holds his words back, tells his woes not too soon,
baring his inner heart before knowing the best way,
an eorl who acts with courage. All shall be well for him who seeks grace,
help from our Father in heaven where a fortress stands for us all.

7. The reference is to a kind of serpentine ornamentation; examples from Roman times survive in Britain.

WULF AND EADWACER

The first three lines of this lyric poem consist of three grammatically coherent sentences, and yet they paint no coherent narrative situation. The reader is obliged to infer that situation from the juxtaposition of sentences: thus the gap of narrative sense between the first and second sentences begs the reader to supply a narrative. But what is that narrative? One might infer that the speaker's people and the male to whom the speaker refers are mutually hostile, and that if "he" comes to

where the speaker is, he will be easily defeated. One might also assume that there is some special relation between that male and the speaker ("We are apart"). The fourth line might confirm the assumption that the special male is physically absent, and it appears to supply a proper name for him ("Wulf").

Each of these inferences is vulnerable, but the reader is impelled to make assumptions of this kind. The remaining twenty lines prompt many further conjectures. Faced with the vulnerability of those assumptions, we might respond variously. We might dismiss this poem as maddeningly incoherent, inviting us as it does to construct a narrative but refusing to supply the needed connectives. Or we might keep testing hypotheses, working from fundamental elements of narrative (e.g., he/I; here/there; now/then). Or we might step back from the enticing puzzles of the poem's texture to think about what kind of poem this is.

Wulf and Eadwacer (an editorial title) appears in the Exeter Book (ca. 975), along with (though not precisely grouped with) all the other so-called Old English elegies, such as *The Wanderer*. Many of these poems are narrated by a first-person narrator who suffers from temporal and physical dislocations. They are relatively short. They tend to suggest, without filling in, a narrative context. Sometimes the experience of worldly pain invites general reflection on the inevitable treacheries of earthly experience.

This poem, like only one other in this group, is voiced by a woman. We learn this for sure only in line 10 (through an adjectival ending). That fact also helps us to set the text in a larger tradition of usually feminine elegy, a genre exemplified especially by Ovid's *Heroides* (*Heroines*). Classical elegy gives voice to the victim of history—often a woman—whose suffering predominates when society demands her sacrifice, and whose suffering is so intense that it overrides any commitment to narrative. The fragmented, incoherently expressed *implied* narrative is part of the poem's point: it sharpens and concentrates the poignancy of the poem's painful expression. This is the voice of a vast tradition of European lyric love poetry, with both male and female narrators.

That understanding of genre accounts for the kind of puzzles we have already encountered. It also accounts for the way in which the pained voice in the present breaks forth over narration of the past ("Wulf, my Wulf"). But the puzzles remain: Is Wulf the narrator's husband or lover? Is the name "Wulf" (a possible proper name, but also a figure for the outlaw) conceptually symmetrical with "Eadwacer" (literally "property watcher"), thus designating the same male? Is the name "Eadwacer" used ironically with regard to the absent, outlawed "Wulf," given that the child of the couple's union is threatened by a literal wolf?

We can never know the answers to these questions, but neither, by the conventions of this genre, are we supposed to. What we do know for sure is that the shared song of this couple is joined painfully only through the longing caused by separation.

Wulf and Eadwacer[1]

It is as though my people have been given
A present. They wish to capture him
If he comes with a troop. We are apart.
Wulf is on one isle, I am on another.
Fast is that island set among the fens.
Murderous are the people who inhabit
That island. They will wish to capture him
If he comes with a troop. We are apart.
Grieved have I for my Wulf with distant longings.

1. The translation is by Richard Hamer, *A Choice of Anglo-Saxon Verse* (1970).

Then was it rainy weather, and I sad,
When the bold warrior laid his arms about me.
I took delight in that and also pain.
O Wulf, my Wulf, my longing for your coming
Has made me ill, the rareness of your visits,
My grieving spirit, not the lack of food.
Eadwacer, do you hear me? For a wolf
Shall carry to the woods our wretched whelp.
Men very easily may put asunder
That which was never joined, our song together.

THE WIFE'S LAMENT

In modern English translation, the speaker of this poem sounds much like the speaker in *The Wanderer*, lamenting his exile, isolation, and the loss of his lord. But in Old English the grammatical gender of the pronouns reveals that this speaker is a woman; the man she refers to as "my lord" must, therefore, be her husband. The story behind the lament remains obscure. All that can be made out for certain is that the speaker was married to a nobleman of another country; that her husband has left her (possibly forced into exile as a result of a feud); that his kinsmen are hostile to her; and that she is now living alone in a wilderness. Although the circumstances are shadowy, it is reasonable to conjecture that the wife may have been a "peace-weaver" (a woman married off to make peace between warring tribes), like Hildeburh and Freawaru, whose politically inspired marriages only result in further bloodshed (see *Beowulf*, pp. 64 and 85). The obscurity of the Old English text has led to diametrically opposed interpretations of the husband's feeling toward his wife. One interpretation holds that, for unexplained reasons, possibly because of his kinsmen's hostility to her, he has turned against her. The other, which is adopted in this translation, is that, in her mind at least, they share the suffering of his exile and their separation. Thus in the line here rendered "I must suffer the feud of my much-beloved," *fæhðu* (feud) is read by some as the technical term for a blood feud—the way it is used in *Beowulf* when Hrothgar says he settled a great feud started by Beowulf's father with *feo* (fee)—that is, monetary compensation (p. 52). Others take the word in a more general sense as referring to the man's enmity toward his wife. In either case, the woman's themes and language resemble those of male "wræccas" (outcasts or exiles; the Old English root survives in modern *wretch*, *wretched*, and *wrack*) in the Old English poems called "elegies" because of their elegiac content and mood.

The Wife's Lament[1]

Full of sorrow, I shall make this song
about me, my own fate. Surely I can tell

1. The translation by Alfred David is based on *Eight Old English Poems*, 3rd ed., edited by John C. Pope and revised by R. D. Fulk (2000).

what sufferings I endured since I came of age,
both the new and old, never more than now.
I must endure without end the misery of exile.
First my lord[2] departed from his people
over tossing waves; I worried when day came
in what land my liege-lord could be.
Then I set out, a friendless exile,
to seek a place for my sore need.
My husband's kin had hatched a plot,
conspiring secretly to separate us,
so that we[3] widest apart in the world's realms
lived in most misery, and I languished.
My lord commanded me to keep house here;
in this dwelling-place; I had few dear ones,
devoted friends. Therefore I feel downcast.
Then I learned my lord was like myself—
down on his luck, dreary-spirited,
secretly minding murder in his heart.
A happy pair we had promised each other,
that death alone would ever divide us,
and nothing else. All that is changed;
our nearness once is now as though
it never had been. Now, far or near, I must
bear the malice of the man I loved.
I was told to live in a grove of trees,
under an oak in an earthen cave.
That earth-hall is old; yearning overcomes me.
These dales are dark and the dunes high,
bitter bulwarks overgrown with briers,
a joyless place. Here my lord's departure
afflicts me cruelly. Friends here on earth,
lovers lying together, lounge in bed,
while at daybreak I abandon
this earthen-pit under the oak
to sit alone the summer-long day.
There I may bewail my many woes,
suffering of exile, for I can never
obtain comfort for all my cares
nor all the longing this life brought me.
If ever anyone should feel anguish,
harsh pain at heart, she[4] should put on
a happy appearance while enduring
endless sorrows— should she possess
all the world's bliss, or be banished far away
from her homeland. I believe my lord sits
by a stony storm-beaten cliff,
that water-tossed my weary friend

2. A woman would refer to her husband as her "lord."
3. Old English *wit*, an example of the dual form, used for two persons.
4. Old English *geong-man*. The identity of the speaker has been debated, but most recent opinion holds it to be the wife herself, speaking impersonally. The translation takes the liberty of using "she" in reference to the speaker.

sits in a desolate home. He must suffer
much in his mind, remembering too often
a happier place. Woe unto him
who languishing waits for a loved one.

THE RUIN

The power of enduring yet decaying architecture is characteristic of post-imperial cultures. The imperialists may have left (as the Romans did when they quit Britain in 420), but their buildings remain for centuries, serving as figures for the fall of earthly kingdoms. Anglo-Saxon poets certainly admired things bound fast. Stable architecture is almost the last thing upon which the dying Beowulf looks: he beholds "those gigantic stones . . . how the earthwork / was braced with arches built over columns" (lines 2718–19). Some buildings constructed by Germanic kings are provisionally capable of resisting the ravages of time for a few generations (for example, Hrothgar's Heorot in *Beowulf*, lines 770–74), but only the Roman buildings inspire awe for their capacity to endure for centuries, to evoke memories of the glory of what has been almost entirely lost from mind, and for the fact that they, too, are finally subject to the destructive effects of what Anglo-Saxons called "wyrd," or fate (the ancestor of our word *weird*). *The Ruin*, though itself damaged in the Exeter Book (ca. 975), expresses awe, admiration, and grief as it surveys what seems almost certainly a Roman building for hot baths.

The Ruin[1]

Splendid this rampart is, though fate destroyed it,
The city buildings fell apart, the works
Of giants crumble. Tumbled are the towers,
Ruined the roofs, and broken the barred gate,
Frost in the plaster, all the ceilings gape,
Torn and collapsed and eaten up by age.
And grit holds in its grip, the hard embrace
Of earth, the dead departed master-builders,
Until a hundred generations now
Of people have passed by. Often this wall
Stained red and grey with lichen has stood by
Surviving storms while kingdoms rose and fell.
And now the high curved wall itself has fallen.
. . .[2]
The heart inspired, incited to swift action.
Resolute masons, skilled in rounded building

1. The translation is from Richard Hamer, *A Choice of Anglo-Saxon Verse* (1970).
2. Six lines are illegible here in the manuscript.

Wondrously linked the framework with iron bonds.
The public halls were bright, with lofty gables,
Bath-houses many; great the cheerful noise,
And many mead-halls filled with human pleasures.
Till mighty fate brought change upon it all.
Slaughter was widespread, pestilence was rife,
And death took all those valiant men away.
The martial halls became deserted places,
The city crumbled, its repairers fell,
Its armies to the earth. And so these halls
Are empty, and this red curved roof now sheds
Its tiles, decay has brought it to the ground,
Smashed it to piles of rubble, where long since
A host of heroes, glorious, gold-adorned,
Gleaming in splendor, proud and flushed with wine,
Shone in their armor, gazed on gems and treasure,
On silver, riches, wealth, and jewelry,
On this bright city with its wide domains.
Stone buildings stood, and the hot steam cast forth
Wide sprays of water, which a wall enclosed
In its bright compass, where convenient
Stood hot baths ready for them at the centre.
Hot streams poured forth over the clear grey stone,
To the round pool and down into the baths.

RIDDLES

"*Saga hwæt ic hatte*" ("Say what I am called") is a frequently repeated imperative in the corpus of Anglo-Saxon riddles. The Exeter Book (ca. 975) not only contains moving elegiac poems, such as *The Wanderer* (pp. 118–21), *The Wife's Lament* (pp. 123–25), and *Wulf and Eadwacer* (pp. 121–23), but also a striking collection of ninety or so riddles. Like the elegies, the riddles are conveyed by first-person narrators, and, also like the elegies, they refuse to disclose the full conditions of their utterance. Whereas that refusal produces an emotional charge in the elegies, in the riddles it produces an intriguing and cognitive challenge.

The Anglo-Saxon riddles are clearly related to a learned Latin tradition of enigmas (*aenigmata*). Even if their subject matter is derived from the empirical world of natural phenomena, of everyday objects and animals, they provoke subtle interpretive challenges that defamiliarize the everyday world. When a poem fails to supply the crucial term of recognition ("what I am") around which understanding rapidly organizes perception, then every feature of the familiar becomes suddenly fascinating. Outworn metaphors spring into rich conceptual life; that which is regarded as purely conceptual is returned to its material condition; the everyday event becomes a wonder; comedy leaps unexpectedly forth from a revitalized account of the humdrum. Things and creatures disclose their mysterious and layered life in the world.

My beak
And dig a
The wood
And guar
Pushes ar
Sows in m
Brought f
Upon the
And as I
And my c
A well-ma
And hang
Firm, poi
Falls dow
Who, as m

Some ene
And took
Dipped m
Set me in
The hairs
Cut me wi
Then fing
Traced oft
Across my
Mixed up
Leaving d
With boar
Decked m
Of smiths
Now my re
My gorgeo
The Lord
If sons of
By that th
Their hear
Their spiri
Dear ones
More kind
And happi
Upon then
And clasp

1. Translations are from Richar
of Anglo-Saxon Verse (1970).