Kit Fryatt : Three Translations from the Exeter Book

DEOR

Weland studied sorrow amongst whom
we don't know rightly. Women, snakes, Swedes.
Righteous errant, he underwent despair,
torment and desire inevitable outriders;
scoured starveling. His luck was bad
ever since Nithhad tattered his tendons,
crippled the cannier man.

That is overcome. This too may be.

§

Beadohild was in no state
to grieve her brothers;
her own condition clear
firm claim on futurity overturned.

That is overcome. This too may be.

§

We know that Maethhild, the Geat's wife,
cried her a river. Sour love: sleep-thief.

That is overcome. This too may be.

§

Theodric ruled Maeringaburg (wherever that was)
thirty years. The dogs in the street know that.

That is overcome. This too may be.

§

And we know also Eormanric,
who had a mind like a mantrap.
Tyrant of the Gothic tribes: one grim king.
Warriors, sodden with sorrow,
waited upon woe, craved continually
a change of regime.

That is overcome. This too may be.

§

The man of constant sorrow, joyless,
lives with louring mind.
It seems his dole is never paid out.
But he can reflect
that God in his wisdom inflicts
on the world all flux:
many receive honour, fast glory;
some a deal of trouble.

As for me, may I say just
that for a while I was the Heodenings' poet,
close to my lord – called *Deor*,
(as to say *my heart*) – through many winters
I held my station and his steadfast favour,
until Heorrenda, now, that *famous seamus*,
took my acres, that beforetimes
my beloved protector gave to me.

That is overcome. This too may be.

EARTHWORK ELEGY

This is my own poem   this is my sad self
this is my undertaking   to tell of my sorrows
ancient and modern   since I grew up
though now is the worst of it.
He left us to cross the raging main
the worst of it is when the sun lies low
what strange soil his pillow?
I went abroad in his service
a poor wayfaring stranger.
Hardly did I come than his dark-thinking
kinsmen plotted what way to cleave us
creatures widest flung apart in the world
and I miserable.
Himself he ordered me to this elder grove
few enough I can trust here
and my mind distracted.
I found a fit and seemly man
unseely   uncanny
minded to murder   gentle and simple

our boast   we two would cleave together
until death alone and no other thing at all
should part us.
That is overturned   as if it never were
our friendship.   The arms of his contention
reach everywhere   my thole is long.
As I was told I stay in this brakebush holt
bunkered beneath an oak
old earthwork.   I am taken up with longing.
Shadowy valley   upswept moor
bitter pale of briars   my houseless home.
His not being here pierces me through.
Out in the world   bedfellows share
their living warmth   while I pace
alone in the low light   under the oak
upon a straitened bed of soil.
I must sit here   a long summer's day
I must sob here   my exile
my trouble   a worried mind
can find no rest   never be whole
without the yearning   life laid upon me.
A young man must be sensible
stout-hearted   seeming blithe
when he is choked with care
the heart smothered in him   then he is thrown
back upon his own self.   Maybe
in exile   worlds away
my fast friend sits   under a hanging rock
storm-scoured   frost-rheumed
salvage lord   beside the squally main
neither fire nor fleet to him.
My desolate protector   his dole is dismal.
Too often his mind turns to a comely home.
Who bides is unhappy
for thole a little   a long way is.

Glosses:

unseely: Of persons: unfortunate, unhappy, miserable, wretched; deserving pity. Or: bringing misfortune on oneself or others; unlucky; evil-doing, wicked [OED]

thole: endurance, suffering, waiting; the phrase 'thole a little / a long way is' is from a Middle English lyric (c. 1275)

fleet: house-room, usually in the phrase **fire and fleet**

WULF

He would be a gift to my people.
If he comes they will quarter him.

Different for us.

Wulf is on that island   I warded on this.
His a fortress   ship of the fens
its marsh-dwellers murderers.
If he comes they will quarter him.

Different for us.

I have grieved   farflung Wulf.
Sleet outside the sunroom   I was sad
the long warrior laid down
his arms around about me.
I delighted   I hated.
Wulf   Wulf   waiting
is starving me   I smell of earth.

Hear that, warden? A wolf will mouth
this cur   carry him to a thicket.
It is easy to tear apart
what never was together
  our seely song.

Note
I cannot read Old English without a crib. These versions were produced with the help of the following texts:

A Choice of Anglo-Saxon Verse, ed. Richard Hamer (London: Faber & Faber, 1970)
The Earliest English Poems, ed. Michael Alexander, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966)
'The Wife's Lament', *Old English at the University of Calgary*, University Of Calgary, accessed August 2006. <http://www.ucalgary.ca/UofC/eduweb/engl403/wife.htm>

When working on these poems, I paid more attention to semantic texture than to rhythm or alliteration. I did not attempt to reproduce the characteristic stress-pattern of Old English verse, though my version of the poem usually called 'The Wife's Lament', here re-titled 'Earthwork Elegy', uses caesurae and line-breaks in place of punctuation marks. I was concerned to convey something of the history of certain words, the multiple meanings generated by semantic change. I also wanted to explore ways in which Old English phrases might be represented by cliché phrases and quotations. Where scholars differ over the meaning of the Old English, as in the mysterious *be wurman* in the first line of 'Deor', I have tried to incorporate a sense of that uncertainty.

'Deor', a monologue apparently spoken in the character of an exiled poet, is one of the Old English poems most congenial to a modern sensibility. We respond enthusiastically to its direct dramatic voice and its stoical, restrained optimism. I have been very fond of this poem since as a teenager I read it in Michael Alexander's translation. Alexander uses a different phrase to translate the refrain on each recurrence, and some of those have remained with me, making unconscious plagiarism a constant danger. The phrase I eventually chose was intended to echo the original's *oferēode*, and to suggest the speaker's cautious perseverance, for 'may be' can easily become 'maybe'. I was also tempted to steal Alexander's 'wolfish wit' for Eomanric – I resisted, paying the price of a somewhat odd metonymy. My equivalent for *dryhtne dyre* is perhaps a little wilful. The closest translation is 'dear to my lord', 'dear' of course, being a pun on the character's name, which means 'animal' in Old English, and later became our word 'deer'. '*My heart'* preserves the wordplay.

'Earthwork Elegy' is a version of the poem normally called 'The Wife's Lament'. The narrative suggested by this monologue is unclear in places, but the usual explanation is that the speaker is a woman who has been ordered to live in the disagreeable conditions described in the poem while her husband is in exile, the result of some crime he committed against his kinsmen, who seem to have opposed the marriage and shunned his wife. Alternative explanations have been proposed: some commentators have seen the poem as a religious allegory of the Church and Christ, while others take *eorðscraefe* and *eorðsele* to mean 'grave', suggesting that the speaker is dead. I have not made much use of these alternative accounts, though the latter must have been in my mind when working on these poems, since a phrase from an Irish version of the ballad-type known as 'The Unquiet Grave (Child #78) has slipped into 'Wulf'. Other unconven-tional commentaries on this poem challenge the gender of the speaker, a conjecture which must overcome the substantial objection that its pronouns and adjectival forms are feminine. Although I had a female speaker in mind throughout, I have taken advantage of the ungendered adjectives and personal pronouns of modern English to present a speaker who may be of either sex. This is less because I believe that the speaker of the original could be male, than because I am interested to explore the poem's themes of loss and loyalty without presuming a marital or sexual relationship at its centre.

'Wulf' is perhaps the loosest of the versions. The apparent refrain, *ungelic is us*, is often taken to connote the separation of the speaker from Wulf and translated 'we are apart'. I have chosen something a bit more literal, which I hope reflects the profound ambiguity of the phrase: from whom or what is the speaker asserting difference? As in 'The Wife's Lament', the personnel and chronology are somewhat confused. According to some commentators, Wulf is the speaker's lover and Eadwacer her husband; Richard Hamer argues persuasively that they are the same person, Wulf being Eadwacer's nickname. I have tried to reflect a little of these mutually incompatible interpretations by replacing the name Eadwacer with a literal translation of its meaning, 'guard, protector'. The phrase 'waiting/ is starving me I smell of earth' condenses three lines in which the speaker explains that it is not hunger that has made her ill, but Wulf's absence. It is derived from a rare Irish example of a standard ballad type, 'Cé sin ar mo thuama?' ('Who is that on my grave?'), in which the relevant line reads 'tá boladh fuar na cré orm' 'I smell of the cold earth'. I can only explain this as a kind of unconscious slippage from my study of 'The Wife's Lament', in which the main case against the 'unquiet grave' reading rests on there being no analogous text among surviving Old English poems.

K.F., 2007