Reading Old English Riddles

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The Dark Glass

By

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For Caz, Jon, Mim and Bec

Contents

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INTRODUCTION

A CURIOUS BUNCH

Riddles are strange beasts. We might recognise one should it cross our paths, but the genre eludes easy definition. Conventional thought tends to dismiss most riddles as literal children's play, not quite worthy of adult attention except as recreation or escape. Modern readers most often encounter riddles in collections published as children's books, and their playful cognitive uncertainty can be most readily associated with the child's boundless curiosity and limited cognitive resources. Working out the riddles of existence today seems a specialised undertaking, specific either to philosophers or to the distinctly pre-adult. The rest of us just get on with it.

Yet most human cultures that have left any kind of literary remains commonly employ riddles as part of their serious efforts to engage with the world and glean at least some tentative sense of its meaning. Reality has always questioned human consciousness, which has learned to respond with questions of its own. Such question-and-answer exchanges can be deadly serious, like the Sphinx's murderous 'Sorry, you lose' response to failed attempts at solving *her* riddle and her suicidal rage that follows its solution by Oedipus. Or such exchanges can offer light entertainment, like the comic silliness of modern children's riddle-books and the cognitive 'gotchas' of most jokes. *What's brown and sticky? A stick*. Riddles *play*: clowning jesters one moment, deep wells of reflection the next. The Shakespearean fool traffics in obscure allusions and conundrums that speak, once 'solved', to the heart of the drama he skirts past with deceptively careless ease.

The eleventh-century codex known as the Exeter Book, preserved to this day in the holdings of the Exeter Cathedral Library, comprises a long and varied collection of every kind of poetry composed in Anglo-Saxon England: lyrics of contemplative devotion, liturgical poetry and saints' lives, riddles and discourses of heroic virtue and sensibility. Its contents are stylistically varied as well: the metaphysical antiphony of *Christ I*, *II* and *III*; the extravagant psychomachia of the two *Guthlac* poems and *Juliana*; the visionary landscapes of *The Phoenix* and *The Order of the World*; the bestiary allegories of *The Whale*, *the Partridge* and *The Panther*; the gnomic pronouncements of *Maxims I*; or the existential introspection of *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer* – to name only a few of its better better-known

poems. It appears to have been a deliberately compiled assemblage, a kind of *Norton Anthology of Old English Verse* from the tenth century. Its final thirty folios, almost a quarter of the whole, are taken up with an assortment of nearly a hundred riddles, the shortest a bare two lines long, the longest, one hundred and eight. On their own, they constitute a broad miscellany, a kind of anthology within the anthology, their solutions ranging from 'Piss' to 'Bookworm' to 'The Cosmos', not to mention the odd curiosity such as 'A One-Eyed Seller of Garlic', and all points in between. Wild and domestic animals, utensils, weapons, weather and even speech itself serve in turn as their quarry. Everyday objects give surreal accounts of their trials and labours. A riddle whose solution is 'wind' walks back the Genesis narrative of creation as it contemplates its solution's destructive aspect. The bookworm riddle questions the biblical foundations of medieval Christianity by subjecting them to a larval insect's unlettered hunger. A butter churn suggests copulation, while a literally copulating cock and hen hint at the mysteries of incarnation. Some riddles appear to answer to no purpose beyond a moment's diversion, others use their enigmatic armature of false and true hints as a kind of metaphysical obstacle course, to put the quester's mind through its paces in pursuit of a world filled with baffling phenomena and portents.

Let me begin by addressing some basics with a slight but telling thought-experiment. Imagine you are walking through an open, grassy expanse, maybe in a park. In the middle distance, you notice an irregular brown mass lying in your path. A discarded paper bag, perhaps? But as you come closer other possibilities suggest themselves. A dog turd ignored by some Great Dane's irresponsible owner? With some unease, you might next see the crumpled form of a dead bird. At each turn, your finely-tuned cognitive expectations have auto-completed the partial clues your eyes have gleaned at a distance. What *is* that? My point here is that, as each different possibility suggests itself, the irregular brown lump morphs into the very thing your mind has conjured before your eyes. One of them may well be true. *Will* be true, once you've drawn near enough to dispel the cognitive haze. Until then, though, that lump *becomes*, almost literally, whatever identity your own imagination conjures for it, magically transformed from one reality to another, moment by moment.

It is a simple (and mostly uncontroversial) fact that our minds 'read' the reality they perceive around us, interpreting partial data and filling in gaps some time before we've acquired enough matter for absolute certainty. It makes a certain evolutionary sense, as we would say today: spotting environmental hazards or discriminating prey (if you're a hungry predator) or a predator (if you might be on the menu) cannot wait on the findings of a

judicial panel of inquiry. Even in less fraught circumstances, our sense of what is real or true involves more snap judgement than we ordinarily recognise. Such first impressions commonly serve well enough in most circumstances.

That sense of the noun 'read' derives from the Old English verb *rædan*, which evolved into the modern verb 'to read' that, for modern speakers, usually denotes the common act of reading text – a book, a menu, a road sign, an email, even a musical score – in a more or less transparent fashion that reconstitutes written glyphs into the sounds, words and meanings they record, an art most of us will have acquired at a relatively young age. We had to learn, with no small labour, to negotiate the tricky borderland between the words we'd learned to speak as toddlers and their approximate representation in alphabetic forms. Bear in mind that we also 'read' gestures and facial expressions, the weather or trends in fashion and politics. A good public speaker can 'read' the room. In this broadest sense, every speech act, from a simple declarative statement of fact to the most challenging utterance of Wallace Stevens' poetry or Wittgenstein's philosophy, requires 'reading' in the sense of decoding and interpreting. So perhaps we should not be surprised to discover that the Old English word for 'riddle' is *rædels*, an abstract noun also derived from *rædan*. At one level, a riddle is a thing to be 'read': unpacked, made sense of, revealed.

We can only wonder why the compilers of the Exeter Book devoted such a large portion of their anthology to the riddles that survive in the manuscript today. Against the profound speculative theology of *The Advent Lyrics* (also known as *Christ I*) or the Vercelli manuscript's *The Dream of the Rood*, or the harrowed existential reflections of *The Wanderer* or *The Seafarer*, the cognitive antics of the riddles might seem shallow play. Yet they are irresistibly drawn to the tangled relationship between reality and cognition. Could this account for the swarm of riddles that hums at the end of the Exeter Book? Might the riddles have somehow suggested to that book's compilers some essence of the poetic process that justified their sometimes-awkward presence in a representative selection? We can only speculate. Like the word *rædels* itself, any riddle's play of intertwined cognitive and verbal possibility hints at how the world hauled in by our senses like a fisherman's net constitutes nothing *but* a ceaseless parade of sphinxian enigmas, more holes than solid cord. Every metaphor is a riddle in small, and, as linguists and philosophers have variously observed for centuries, all language, looked at closely enough, resolves to nothing but a tissue of embedded metaphors. Most have been rubbed free of any poetic effect through long usage and familiarity, but the shared etymologies of words

such as 'respiration', 'aspiration' and 'inspiration'[1] reveal fossil metaphors embedded just beneath the skin of language.

Thus, by trafficking in riddles, the Exeter Book appears to play with the stuff of language and poetry themselves, a consideration wholly in keeping with its main purpose as a wide-ranging anthology. From this vantage, we might recall how Virgil regularly admonishes Dante during their long trek through hell and purgatory to look and to look *again*. The truth can be tricky.[2] First impressions may not necessarily deceive, but they rarely tell the whole story. In this regard, many of the Exeter Book riddles constitute a special subset of wisdom literature that playfully bids us to take nothing at face value and engage deliberately in the ludic shuffle of appearances.

This book contains translations of almost all the riddles in the Exeter Book, the only extant manuscript from the period dedicated to nearly the full range of poetry produced in Old English, the language of Anglo-Saxon England. The only other text from the same milieu devoted solely to poetry is the roughly contemporary manuscript identified now as Junius 11, which contains four long religious poems: verse paraphrases of sections of the Old Testament books of Genesis, Exodus, and Daniel, and a poetic dialogue known today as *Christ and Satan*, in which those two figures debate Christ's right to harry hell between his crucifixion and resurrection. The Exeter Book contains a wide selection of poems: verse saints' lives and other religious expositions and meditations, as well as pieces of less certain orientation like the so-called 'elegies' known today as *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*, which occupy a palpably Christian cosmos but take other bearings as well, drawing on the poets' native tradition, whose values were shaped across the centuries that preceded the Anglo-Saxons' conversion.

All of these poems embed vestigial elements of a so-called 'heroic' diction, which uses characteristic vocabulary and formulae that reflect the ideals and values of that unsettled time. These celebrate the virtues of a warrior-aristocracy: fortitude, communal solidarity, and good faith above all. They also address the darker powers that haunt such societies: fate and its fell sergeant death, the fickle dispositions of fortune and the instability of social and political relations. The lands known to the Romans collectively as *Germania* then comprised a shifting patchwork of small tribes and clans webbed by unstable patterns of alliance and feud. Spells of peace tended to be brief and fragile.

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[1]All three derive from the Latin *spiritus*, which can mean 'wind', 'breath' or 'life-force', in roughly the same way as the Greek *pneuma* ('pneumatic', 'pneumatology', 'pneumonia') or the Hebrew *ruah*.

[2]As noted in l. 10a of *Maxims II*: *soð bið swicolost* ('truth is trickiest').

These conditions left their mark on the values handed down from those years to the descendants of the continental Germanic peoples (traditionally identified as the Angles, Saxons and Jutes) who eventually crossed the North Sea to occupy different regions of the old Roman province of Britannia. That insular province had been stripped of its last legions in 410 CE, which left its Romano-Celtic population exposed to 'barbarian' incursions. The locals eventually found themselves pressed back to the Celtic periphery of the British Isles, in regions now identified as Cornwall, Wales, Ireland and Scotland.[3]

Whether the Angles, Saxons and Jutes came to dominate the central regions (then known as *Englaland* 'the land of the Angles', later 'England') through outright conquest or demographic pressure is still debated by scholars. English place-names contain very few Celtic elements, suggesting only limited cultural engagement between existing populations and the newcomers. But the archaeological evidence points to a more gradual transition from one dominant population to another. Both violent seizure and the long, slow roll of human tides no doubt played their part, but however it came to pass, the various *cyn*-groups[4] that established themselves in *Englaland* shared a pre-literate culture whose preservation and transmission depended on the oral art of its poets, or *scopas*. The authority of their alliterative verse-forms ebbed in the face of Christianity's introduction of a new culture of the book, whose pre-eminence has only in our time begun to give way to the dominion of the computer, the internet and artificial intelligence. The advent of Christian literacy ultimately supplanted the oral authority of the *scop*, a circumstance to which the riddles allude repeatedly, with differing degrees cryptic indirection.

Modern readers, awash in our seas of print (whether constituted by pixels on screens or old-school ink on paper), cannot easily imagine the authority potentially wielded by the earlier oral forms of poetry in the Anglo-Saxon consciousness. Even scholars can only speculate, but the riddles emerge from this uncertain confluence of antithetical traditions, Christian/textual and pagan/oral. It is this delicately poised historical juncture that lends the Exeter riddles a special significance and an extra dimension of enigma. For all their debt to riddle-traditions from Mediterranean and Near-Eastern cultures, they channel the resources of *two* contrasting *milieux*, the Latinate Christian and the native Germanic. And they do so across a wide range of registers. A crude bit of sexual humour

[3]As their ancestors had been by Roman incursions from the time of the emperor Claudius' invasion in 43 CE.

[4]Old English *cyn* (which becomes modern English 'kin') denotes those related by blood, whose society was presided over by a *cyning* ('king').

might conceal a profound reflection on the nature of incarnate life. A common household object may, like a prism, refract its mundane existence into a rainbow of different behaviours and uses. Unknown speakers narrate their own often violent deaths and report extraordinary post-mortem experiences. The riddles are rife with human relations of every sort.

A device commonly taken up in the riddles, accounting for fully half of those in the Exeter Book collection, is known to literary critics as 'prosopopoeia'. The term derives from the Greek *prósopon* ('face, person'), and *poiéin* ('to make, to do') – i.e. to lend a speaking face to an otherwise mute inanimate object. Its most celebrated example in Old English is the talking cross that narrates its own story in the first half of *The Dream of the Rood*, a poem which borrows other techniques from the riddler's repertoire as well.[5] In these so-called 'first-person' riddles, the solution actually speaks to the reader or listener, but in a voice that conceals as much as it reveals. Beyond the basic riddle-game of hide-and-seek, this technique presents the audience with an animate cosmos, whose elements, from the most fundamental and material to the most large-scale and abstract, mask living presences. In this universe of riddles, you look at the world, and the world looks (and talks) back. Even the third-person riddles, whose solutions do not speak but are merely described, often personify them in strongly anthropomorphic or zoomorphic terms that lend them their own kind of personhood or creaturely *anima*.

This aspect of the riddles raises large questions about their origin, none of which we can fully answer but which ask us to ponder the complex relationships that run between language, thought and imagination. It is possible to imagine that riddles represent some vestige of what anthropology once called 'participatory consciousness', from studies of what were traditionally regarded as 'animist' beliefs,[6] in which the basic texture of the cosmos is invested with (or simply manifests) personal qualities and living presences. The latter of these, in the developed world at least, were driven from the scene of acceptable thought by the double whammy of Christian teaching, followed by the advent of modern science and the industrial revolution, revolutions which in their very different ways have compelled us to view the world as a scene of purely material processes. Not without their vigour, but to be regarded objectively and impersonally, no longer imbued with the personal presence we now read only in others' faces and voices. Life itself, in our day, tends to be regarded in scientific

[5]Discussed in Chapter Eleven below.

[6]I put 'animist' in scare-quotes here, because as a label it smacks of nineteenth-century scientism and presumes to identify such cultures with summary labels that cannot capture their essence adequately.

circles as an epiphenomenon of purely material (and therefore analysable) processes. We master today's reality (or so we believe) by dismissing much of its living presence and using whatever's left to our advantage. Modern psychology often approaches the mind as a possession, a congeries of structures and processes that generates thought in some externally evident and explanable fashion. In this view, the notion that we possess a sequestered interior where something called 'thought' happens is essentially a polite humanist fiction. The riddles approach the question differently: they regard a world 'out there' that is also 'in here', registering deep within the human psyche. Mind and world contain each other, a paradox with potential implications for latter-day discourses about climate change and other environmental degradation, which often express deep concerns about the consequences of merely instrumental engagements with reality. Is it ironic or inevitable (or both?) that the early-medieval riddles of the Exeter Book might afford us glimpses of different possibilities?

Presentation

My selection comprises most of the riddles in the Exeter Book, excluding only those items that have lost sizeable chunks of text to manuscript damage. The riddles are gathered in two separate sequences, the second of which occupies the final pages of the manuscript,[7] which in later centuries appears to have served as a scriptorium work-surface or cutting board. Whole strips of text in its final pages have been excised by deep diagonal slashes, and spills from glue-pots appear to have left circular stains that obscure bits of the remaining text. Imagine a Shakespeare first folio relegated to the kitchen to serve as a chopping-block. As we read poems composed in a culture haunted by notions of inscrutable fate, we might pause here to reflect on the uncanny play of chance and circumstance in the survival of Anglo-Saxon manuscripts. The language of the Exeter Book would in any event have rendered it unreadable within one or two centuries of the Norman Conquest. Although this no doubt led to the hard use it was later subject to, had the book not found some other employment, however humble, it might not have survived at all, in even its reduced state.

My presentation of the riddles differs from the manuscript's in two ways. First, though the originals are given neither titles nor solutions in the Exeter Book, I have used my choice of their commonly accepted solutions as titles for my translations, by which I will refer to them throughout. Second, rather

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Of course, grouping them this way entails identifying each riddle's solution beforehand, a compromise I have struck reluctantly. All the Exeter Book riddles, unlike riddles in the Anglo-Latin tradition (see below) are offered without explicit solutions, which is, incidentally, why those of a few remain uncertain to this day. They constitute proper cognitive challenges, sometimes quite formidable. But as many scholars have observed, the formal 'solution' of an Old English riddle represents only a first stage in the unpacking its enigmatic depths. So my giving the game away beforehand shouldn't spoil the better part of their effect, and regarding thematically-related riddles side-by-side can reveal further depths in the play of similarity and difference among them.

In the penultimate chapter I look beyond the Exeter Book riddles to other Old English poetry that contains riddlic elements, as evidence of the genre's broad reach among Anglo-Saxon authors.

The Anglo-Latin tradition of *enigmata* demands brief mention here. A number of Anglo-Saxon authors, whose names have been preserved (unlike those of most of the vernacular poets), composed riddles in Latin, using the metre and conventions of hexameral verse. Tatwine (670?-734), an early archbishop of Canterbury, and Aldhelm (639?-709), abbot of Malmesbury and bishop of Sherbourne, wrote riddle-sequences in Latin whose manner differs broadly from that of the anonymous Exeter Book riddles, although 'Mail Shirt' (discussed in Chapter Five) and 'Creation I' (Chapter Ten) translate Aldhelm's *Lorica* and his concluding hundredth riddle, *Creatio*, respectively. In the surviving collections of Latin riddles by Tatwine and Aldhelm, the common convention is to title the riddle with its solution.[8] For its reader, the Latin riddle's primary purpose is not to pose a conundrum but to demonstrate its author's command of a wide range of figural language and verbal adornment. In effect, they are pure rhetorical exercises. That said, the Old English riddle clearly comes to us embedded in a broad Anglo-Latin

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tradition of often cerebral literary play,[9] but despite its continental heritage, it seems a fundamentally different creature in its own habitat. Since my primary intention in this book is, primarily, to introduce interested general readers to the singular psychodynamics of the Exeter Book collection, I mostly leave the Anglo-Latin *aenigmata* to one side, with the exception of Aldhelm's *Lorica* (see 'Mail Shirt' in Chapter Five) and *Creatio* (see 'Creation I' in Chapter 10), translations which figure in the mix of Exeter Book riddles.

I must acknowledge here that many generations of scholars have submitted the Exeter Book riddles to searching analyses. My debt to them in this book is, however, indirect. I have sought primarily to respond to the riddles purely as a reader/hearer, with as few pre-conceptions as possible, especially because recent scholarship on the riddles has grown profuse. The preoccupations of most scholars tend to be narrowly focused on confirming solutions and establishing literary genealogy, tied primarily to the large number of surviving Latin riddles. Yet I suspect the Exeter Book riddles represent a peculiarly Anglo-Saxon phenomenon, whatever other ancestries their DNA might encode, and for that very reason I have deliberately looked away from published studies. If in the process I have either blundered or simply re-invented the wheel, I think such stumbles worth the risk: riddles demand open minds, and I've done what I can to hold mine apart (as far possible) from the assumptions and judgements of other scholars.

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CHAPTER ONE

ON THE WINGS OF SONG

BIRDS

The riddles in this chapter all resolve, with varying degrees of certainty, to one or another kind of bird. They share a common range of clues that invoke the freedom of flight: birds move through the lighter element of air. Their liberty from the heavy earth is imaged in the flight of swallows or the swan's far wanderings, or in the exuberant songs of the jay or the nightingale. Nearly all these bird-riddles establish an atmosphere of exultant *joie de vivre*, commonly associated with birds by the human imagination for most of its earth-bound history. No doubt this can account in part for the common visual device of grafting wings onto unlikely body-types such as those of humans, lions or bulls to suggest a spiritual intelligence or presence. In my *Engelboc* I've played with the notion directly:

> They've had their portraits taken, now and then:
> the feathered souls of the dead in *Gilgamesh*.
> The lions of Assyria with wings
> and burly haunches planted on the earth.
> The seraphim who kneel across the ark
> to guard the jealous mystery of God.
> Renaissance masters, deft at feathered grafts
> on human shoulder blades. Always wings:
> those paddles of the sky that signify
> an aerial nature.[1]

Perhaps more significantly in the Anglo-Saxon context, the bird-riddles frequently reference *song* as an expression of the ecstatic freedom enjoyed by these denizens of the air. We can hear it in the voices of literal songbirds such as the jay or the nightingale, or in the swan's musical plumage, that shimmers with sweet sound whenever it takes to the air. Reflecting the high value Anglo-Saxon culture placed on poetry, these regular allusions to

[1]From 'From the Galleries' in *Engelboc* (Kyneton: Littlefox Press, 2019).

music and song evoke its uncanny power to articulate upwelling energies of delight (as William Blake might have called them).

I have deferred two bird-riddles to a later chapter: 'Jay' (*W* 22, *O* 22, *K&D* 24) and 'Cock and Hen' (*W* 40, *O* 40, *K&D* 42). Both employ runes as part of their play of code and concealment, so I will discuss them in Chapter Eight, which considers how runic characters can contribute to the riddles' play of revealing concealment.

Swan

(*W* 5, *O* 5, *K&D* 7)

My attire falls silent when I tread the earth
or turn to my abode and stir the waters.
Sometimes my raiment and this lofty air
convey me high above the dwellings of men,
and then the strength of the clouds conveys me far,
across the nation. My get-up whooshes loudly,
resonates and brightly sings, once I
leave water and earth behind, a wandering spirit.

This first of the bird-riddles is also one of the more frequently anthologised. Its speaker inhabits different elemental environments that shift in a kind of outward metamorphosis. Across the riddles we frequently encounter the subtle engagements of bodily form and identity. Here the speaker is at home everywhere (on land and water and in the air) yet nowhere, a 'wandering spirit'. Its voice (like those of all the first-person riddles) resonates in the structure of the poem, yet it depicts itself transcending other human structures – 'the dwellings of men' – held aloft by the misty external agency of the clouds and the more intimate agency of its attire. The words it uses to name its clothing, *hrægl* ('attire', 'raiment'), *hyrste* ('accoutrements', 'gear'), and *frætwe* ('adornments', 'get-up'), focus our attention on the aesthetic aspect of its raiment, like the opulent trappings unearthed from the Sutton Hoo burial. Yet this speaker's attire lifts it *above* mead-hall or hut into far, high realms of air and song. No longer in touch with the heavier elements of earth and water that constitute most of the human body, we might note, its aerial musicality accords with medieval conceptions of the angelic. Yet it inhabits no celestial choir-stall, being instead a *ferende gæst* (a 'wandering' or 'travelling spirit').

This may be no coincidence, since the bird speaking here is a swan, whose downy wings grace depictions of angels through all ages of Christian art. The primary clue to its identity in the riddle, however, is a piece of

legendary medieval zoology: in addition to ancient traditions concerning the song of the 'dying swan' is a less well-known belief that its wings make musical sounds whenever it takes to the air. Migratory swans have served as an evocative image for as long as humans have noticed them, from ancient times to the poetry of Yeats and beyond. Imagination has frequently overpowered mere observation:[2] anyone who's heard real swans leap into the sky at close range will recall powerful movement and a great whoosh of air set suddenly astir, but not a tune they can whistle on their way home. The *cygnus musicus* or whistling swan emits a flute-like call in flight and is named in some medieval authorities, but the riddle's focus on this swan's leap from water to air feels more archetypal than zoological. The speaker insists it is its *attire* that sounds musically in flight – the rustle of the swan's great feathers? Perhaps: the image of singing raiment appears elsewhere in the Old English heroic tradition. When warriors move, especially *en masse*, their accoutrements, and in particular their mail shirts, are commonly observed by Anglo-Saxon poets to 'sing' – the linked rings shimmer to eyes and ears alike, a synaesthesia that gives a keen voice to a warrior-aristocracy's regard for the tools of its craft. The riddle's double-image of the swan – in stately progress across its pool and on the wing as it flies across far-flung lands – perfectly aligns the animal's earthly and heavenly aspects. We might remember too how visual depictions of angels in medieval and renaissance art routinely lend them the swan's dazzlingly white wings as emblems of pure and exalted being.

I have already mentioned the 'swan-song', associated since at least the third century BCE with the bird's final flight, and the evocative image of migratory 'wild geese', both of which reflect an instinctive desire to invest these large, migratory birds with human moods of aspiration, longing and melancholy. These are the modes of Old English lyrics commonly identified as 'elegies' such as *Deor*, *The Wanderer*, and *The Seafarer*. But as we shall see, 'Swan' and the other bird-riddles that follow dwell both on the physical freedom of bird-flight and on the ecstatic transport of bird-song. Both suggest the poet's own exalted condition as a cunning and inspired wielder of language.

[2]Consider, for example. Yeats's 'Leda and the Swan' or 'The Wild Swans at Coole' for different mythological expansions in a modern register.

Nightingale

(*W* 6, *O* 6, *K&D* 8)

Through my mouth I speak in many tongues,
in many modulations sing, transform
the voice sprung from my head, and loudly cry.
I keep to my custom and do not hide my song.
Old minstrel of the twilight, I bring men
delight in their walled towns. When I let fly
with my voice for those inhabitants, they sit
quite still in silence. Say what I'm called,
who like a minstrel perform so splendidly,
loudly imitate, send forth my voice,
a welcome visitant to the haunts of men.

The speaker talks about its own voice as an instrument alive with metamorphic possibilities. It is an accomplished singer, with an extensive repertoire of different voices. Is it a mimic, a polyglot, or simply a vocalist with a wide range of pitch and timbre? We can't quite tell, though its voice clearly embraces many tones, rhythms and phrasings. It entertains, yet its performance inspires a kind of reverence, marked by its human audience's silent attendance. It characterises itself as an *eald æfen-sceop* (literally 'old evening-poet'), associating its art with both the cognitive uncertainties of twilight and the voice of the *scop*, the poet of native tradition whose office long pre-dates the advent of Christianity among the Anglo-Saxons. Like the *scop*'s, this speaker's performances are a public display. Except, of course, that its self-description in a *riddle* entails, perforce, both concealment and revelation. Its multiply-modulated voice also aligns it with the *scop*: Old English poetry depends on dramatised voice for much of its effect. Critics debate to this day how many voices we hear in *The Wanderer*, for example. In *The Dream of the Rood*,[3] the choreography of the dreamer's voice and the voice of the cross which speaks in his dream carries much of the drama of transformed identity that underlies the entire lyric. And in the heroic discourse of *Beowulf* (and of its many analogues in other long narrative poems such as *Christ and Satan*, *Guthlac*, *Juliana*, *Elene* and *Andreas*), the main vehicle of heroic utterance is dialogic: the *scop* too can impersonate the voices of different protagonists.

This singer's characterisation of itself as 'old' seems at first glance a gratuitously puzzling detail. The vigour and beauty of its singing suggests

[3]A poem with its own riddlic qualities: see Chapter Eleven below.

the quickening, upwelling energies of youth rather than the autumnal ingathering of old age. In what other way can it be thought of as 'old'? As some kind of *scop*, of course, the speaker's art would inevitably invoke the deeply traditional inherited practice of vernacular poetry in Anglo-Saxon England. Could we press this association further? Could the image of an old *scop* suggest some larger awareness of the tradition's increasing belatedness in its new Christian environment, that was committing its old resources of diction and imagery to a thorough makeover? Though such speculation evades confident resolution, it haunts the margins of this riddle with some insistence.

The poem's literal sense does not demand we hear the speaker as a bird, but the wide reach and charm of its voice suggests birdsong. And the *æfen* ('evening') in *æfen-sceop* is no doubt a strong clue: in Old English this bird is called *nihtegale*, 'nightingale', the *philomela* of Latin tradition whose evocative twilight-song has inflected a wealth of literary traditions.

Cuckoo

(*W* 7, *O* 7, *K&D* 9)

Both father and mother left me for dead this day;
no life in me as yet, no spark within.
But then a faithful woman wove me clothes,
sheltered me, gave comfort, wrapped me up
in garments to protect me, graciously,
as she had clad her own child, till I grew
beneath her blankets – such my nature was –
a guest of most un-sibling temperament.
That fair damsel continued to nourish me,
till I grew strong, fit for journeying wide.
Then she possessed the fewer darling ones,
sons and daughters, than she had owned before.

This riddle's speaker addresses us across deep fault-lines that fracture the most intimate social relationships: it is 'left for dead' by its own parents, and the biological fact of its begetting affords no guarantee of life. Instead, it finds itself nurtured by a foster-mother who lavishes on it the same care she bestows on her own offspring. Its good fortune, however, spells disaster for its benefactor. Beneath the covering it shares with its foster-sibling,