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Boethius' *De consolatione philosophiae* vs. *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*

Abstract: Boethius' work *De consolatione philosophiae* was brought to Britain by the Romans. Translated into English by the king of Wessex, Alfred the Great (841—899 AD), this poem might have influenced some native poems, especially two Christian elegies — *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*. In those poems can be seen the philosophical memento left by the Roman author.

Key words: Boethius, *De consolatione philosophiae*, *The Wanderer*, *The Seafarer*

In Old English literature¹ there are many connections with ancient Rome, and motifs which are taken from culture and history of Roman Empire. First Romans came to Britain in 55 BC — when Julius Caesar was fighting in Gallia. At that time, small Roman troops landed on English shore, but neither penetrated into unknown land nor spent much time on the island. The next invasion was made by the Emperor Claudius in 43 AD. It is when the province Britannia was claimed. The province was divided into two parts known as Britannia Superior and Britannia Inferior. Roman domination brought culture and administration of Imperium Romanum. After defeat of some Celtic tribes and expulsion of the Picts to the northern part of the island, the South was almost totally romanised. The rule of Rome was ended as a result of events in the capital of the Empire. In 410 all legions which were gathered in Britannia were called out to Rome because of rising political tension and the threat of the civil war. After the Romans' departure,

¹ Since its beginning to 1100 AD. See for example: *England Before the Conquest*. Eds. P. Clemoes, K. Hughes. Cambridge 1971; or W.P. Ker: *Wczesne średniowiecze (zarys historii literatury)*. Wrocław 1987.

the province was attacked by barbaric tribes, especially the Picts and Germanic Saxons who came from the continent. Saxons conquered the land, which resulted in many changes. The new conquerors were people not so developed and civilised as Britannia's inhabitants and their rule made the island barbarised again and retarded (for example, Saxons were still having tribal structure of society). That time is now known as the dark ages. What is more, Roman religion and Christianity became abandoned and forgotten for Germanic cults.

Old English literature was strongly influenced by Germanic sagas. In those literary works was shown the main power that ruled over the world. The power — *wyrd* — was destiny to which all the creation was submitted. *Wyrd* was believed to have been unstoppable and inevitable. Nobody and nothing could change it; the whole world was constantly going to its end. Even the gods were supposed to die in the final battle of Ragnarök. The very idea of destiny widely influenced Northern Europe's *Weltanschauung* and also increased pessimism about the future of former province Britannia's people. In early medieval period the island's political situation was very unstable — it was divided into a few kingdoms, which were constantly fighting one another. What is more, there was also an exterior threat of war with Germanic tribes from the continent and the Celts from Ireland. In 8th century the Vikings' (especially Danes') invasions started.

The instability of life and destiny were emphasized by Latin maxims often quoted by the English chronicles: *sic transit gloria mundi* and *ubi sunt qui ante nos fuerunt*. These words were connected with the former glory of Roman Empire, which once ruled over the world but its power faded away. An example of it were ruins from Roman times that reminded people of the world's futility. After death there was only the world of mist, cold and inhospitable wasteland, where the dead were wondering endlessly.

Two Christian elegies, *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*, differ from the other literary works filled with pessimism and the idea of inevitable destiny. The elegies are not deprived of fatalism and the feeling of sorrow, but they contain an original concept that life's instability, pain and grief have sense and can be the source of wisdom. The concept of wisdom brought from suffering resembles the one given by Anicius Manlius Torquatus Severinus Boethius' in *De consolazione philosophiae*. This work had been translated by Alfred the Great probably before the elegies were written.

Christianity returned to Britannia at the end of the 6th century, but its apogee was in 9th century, especially in Northumbria. That period is known as the Northumbrian renaissance. The king of Wessex, Alfred the Great (841—899, ruled between 871—899) is known as its chief maker. Alfred, who had been in Rome in his childhood, wanted his kingdom to become the new Rome. He was strongly influenced by the vision of the past of Imperium Romanum and the first step to bring it back was development of his people's education. King, who loved literature, translated some Latin works himself and added his own prefaces to them.

Among his translations were *Regula Pastoralis* by Gregory the Great, St. Augustine's *Soliloquies*, Orosius' *Historiarum libri VII adversus paganos* and finally *De consolatione philosophiae* by Boethius. Shortly after, the two Christian elegies are believed to have been written. The anonymous authors of them might have known Boethius' work from king Alfred's translation.

In *De consolatione...* Boethius mentioned the instability of Fortune and ever-changing destiny. He wrote that "your riches cannot pass to others without being lessened: and when they pass, they make poor those whom they leave."² Destiny, which rules over the life, is capricious and sends both grief and happiness — not exactly in the same amount. Even the happiest life must end. That fatalistic concept resembles Germanic idea of *wyrd*, but Roman author did not only complained about misfortune and life's shortness and fragility. Remedy for the sorrow can be philosophy which leads to understanding that the greatest good can be achieved just by mind. The good is steady and unchanging. According to Boethius, it is Fortune that wisely rules over everything. Human mind can be released from its prison and be earthbound no longer.³

The speaker in *The Seafarer*, recorded in the Exeter Book (10th/11th c.), is an old sailor. The sailor is in his boat floating on the turbulent sea. At first, he describes the hardships of the life on the sea: humidity, coldness and mist. On the other hand, life on earth seems to be happy — people have food and wine, can live in towns and meet friends. Living on the land is also less dangerous compared to sailing. Though, the old sailor wants to live on the sea, because what was once good on the Earth, vanished. He says sorrowfully:

The great old days have gone, and all the grandeur
Of earth; there are not Caesars now or kings
Or patrons such as once there used to be,
Amongst whom were performed most glorious deeds,
Who lived in worldiest renown.⁴

Memory of the long lost kings and Roman emperors can be described by the words *ubi sunt qui ante nos fuerunt*. The rulers were so powerful, yet so fragile. They belong to the past. According to the speaker, that old world was better than the present, his own.

After that sad confession, the sailor starts to speak about God. For the old man, God is the most crucial power. His faith in God promises him an eternal life after death. Although the life on Earth is easier, the sailor wants to be at sea and

² Boethius: *De consolatione philosophiae*. Trans. W.V. Cooper. London 1902, ch. 2, p. 30.

³ About Boethius' philosophy see for example A. Kucz: *Dyskurs z filozofią w Consolatio philosophiae Boecjusza*. Katowice 2005.

⁴ *The Seafarer*. Trans. R. Hamer, <http://www.anglo-saxons.net>, v. 81—85, reference management software: September 2010.

deal with all the hardships of it. Riches are not worthy for him, because they are transient:

Because the joys of God mean more to me
 Than this dead, transitory life on land.
 That earthly wealth lasts to eternity
 I don't believe.⁵

Life in paradise is the reward for bearing all the pain and suffering humbly. The elegy ends with thanksgiving and praise of God, whose presence makes sense of life:

Where life belongs amid the love of God,
 Hope in the heavens. The Holy One be thanked
 That He had raised us up, the Prince of Glory,
 Lord without end, to all eternity. Amen.⁶

The second elegy, *The Wanderer*, shows a man who sits in a boat floating to an unknown direction. The man is an exile, his boat does not even have oars. He tells the story of his life and complains about the cruelty and instability of *wyrd*. The exile was given a great happiness by it, but eventually he lost everything. Memories of the past days — when he was a warrior and was spending his time on fighting or feasting — are still haunting him. Not only was he wealthy and had many friends, but also his lord thought of him as the best of the warriors and praised him. These days ended when his lord and friends died in the battle. The speaker himself was exiled, so he has only the boat without oars. The gloomy landscape around him grieves his heart and brings to his mind the past kings and warlords, whose riches did not save them from being dead and forgotten. Is there any remedy for the sorrow and how it can be defeated? The exile says that man should bear his pain with patience and do not think about wealth on Earth. This leads him to the real wisdom which is connected with the experience. A wise person learns from it and makes pain and suffering the sources of wisdom:

A wise man must be patient, not too hasty
 [...]
 Nor ever must he be too quick to boast
 Before he's gained experience of himself.⁷

Human race can only have faith in God's words which promise a reward after death.

⁵ Ibidem, vv. 65—68.

⁶ Ibidem, vv. 124—127.

⁷ *The Wanderer*. Trans. R. Hamer, <http://www.anglo-saxons.net>, vv. 67, 71—72, reference management software: September 2010.

The vision of the lapsing of time, ruthless death and destiny's changeability is shown in both elegies. What is interesting in *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*, they present some new views on the instability of material life. What is particular is the concept of wisdom brought from suffering. Losing all friends and position or bearing the hardships at sea does not mean to be misfortuned or even defeated. It can bring comfort and hope for achieving something good after death. *The Seafarer* and *The Wanderer* are consolations for a person who suffers. It is not known if the anonymous authors knew Boethius' *De consolazione philosophiae*, but they all complain of destiny — *wyrd* or Fortune. Eventually, they found a remedy for sorrow — conscience of the greater good, which never declines and lasts forever. By understanding it, a person who suffers will be comforted even in the most difficult situation, just like Boethius in prison, the sailor on the sea and the exile in the boat floating to nowhere.