



PASTORAL FRAGMENTS



Five verses of labour and brotherhood
from the Medieval north

First published in London, 1889

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Typeset in Mr William Caslon's lettering

Original edition privately printed.

Translator and publisher unnamed at the time

Recently identified to be Edmund Vane

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The following verses were found on leaves of parchment folded within the rear board of a liturgical volume of uncertain provenance. The manuscript is believed to date from the early thirteenth century. Its original tongue suggests northern composition.

Opus Dimissum (the work left)

The ox stood fast. Three days it had done so.

No goad nor draught nor cursing moved the beast,

And the ploughman set his staff upon the land and stood,
the furrow half-turned at his feet.

The goadsman came to the ploughman and
set hands upon the older man's shoulders —

As one will, when the labour has beaten you both.

He worked the cords of the other's neck
as you would a beast.

The ploughman did not speak.

He did not move away. The hands upon him moved.

When the goadsman drew him close
— closer than the cold or comfort asked for
— the ploughman leaned back into what was offered.

They stood such until the rooks had long since settled.
No word passed between them then, nor after.

But each carried the other's weight home that evening.
The record says only: the work was done.

Planctus Ignotus (a lament of unknown origin)

I have heard many confessions. This was new to me.

A famulus came before me in the cold of Lent
and I had no penance for him.

He had kept three nights' watchover an elder frater in fever
— stayed beyond duty, beyond reason, and listened.

The frater spoke in his darkness of deep longing
and of another brother.

The younger man carried this for many days.

He then enquired:

do you remember what you spoke of, in the fever?

The frater was not truly sure. He knew what was meant.

I will not break my vows now.

But if I were to, it would be with one like you.

The famulus heard this as a door closing. He asked me
before he left: if God made all things, did he make this also?

I gave the answer I am required to give.

I have been sitting with that since.

The pain the famulus felt in hearing
that which the Church has words for.

Tonight those words do not serve me.

I write into the dark — not certain of the sin,
not certain of the remedy, not certain, tonight,
of the ground beneath me.

De Natura Rei (of the nature of the thing)

The frater came after the milling. He knelt correctly. Then
spoke unexpectedly.

He had been at the lesser grain mill
— the machinery holding his curiosity.

A tenant was already there, red-haired, grain bags
on his shoulders, ready to grind and to pay what is required.

The noise made words impossible. They worked by gesture
— where to stand, how to lift, when to hold.

When the work was done they sat together in the din and
watched the wheel turn. Shoulder pushed tight against
shoulder. Neither moved.

The frater told me: I wanted to sin but I did not.
But the wanting, father — it did not feel like darkness.
It felt of nature; of being less alone.

I, on my turn, gave him his penance.

Fragmenta Vernalia (spring fragments)

I.

Two of the famuli were seen at the beck during
the washing of sheep. It is true the animals must be held,
passed between hands, kept from the current - this work
requires much closeness. This, however, was more.

These two worked as otters work in water
— so tangled in their purpose that one watching could not
say where the work ended and something else began.

II.

A younger man was watching two others a-shearing. He was
desirous of being brought in - of proving himself enough man.
He was shown much more than the shearing requires.

They were seen after as rams are seen when the season is on
them — purposeful, without apology.

III.

Two men caught up in a storm on the Pomfret road,
sheltering with a packhorse train in a building
I will not dignify by calling a barn.

It is said they were found as beasts in a stable at winter's end
— folded so close together that the warmth between them had
become its own country, and neither wished to ever leave it.

I have prayed on all these things.
I find I am praying a great deal this spring.

Visitatio ad Ecclesiam Albam

The frater rode out to the white church to cover his regular business with the parish priest.

The business concluded quickly.

The parish priest drew attention to the newly painted wall — the gift of the brothers, the work of a travelling hand.

Jonathan and David were shown together in the moment of the giving — the armour passing between them.

The frater remarked that the painter had strong feelings about his subject. The painter has rendered both with particular attention to their physical masculinity, to the angle of the shoulder, to the way one man's hand lingered at another's buckle.

As the parish priest agreed, the frater noted that the other holy man was watching him rather than the wall.

They stood together longer than required.

The frater moved to examine the scene closer.

The parish priest settled his hand upon the other's shoulder. Neither man moved.



Translator's notes: The planctus — is a form of private clerical lament, common to the period. It is written in a single hand. It is not a confession. It is, I think, something considerably more difficult than that.

The term frater denotes a brother of the Order; the famulus a permanent paid labourer of the grange. I have preserved both terms, finding no English equivalent that carries their full weight.

Da Natura Rei being a record kept by the same hand as the planctus preceding it, though the tone differs markedly. Where the planctus laments, this document calculates. I have rendered it into verse, finding the original's precision somehow more bearable in that form. Why the priest retained it, the reader will, I think, determine for themselves.

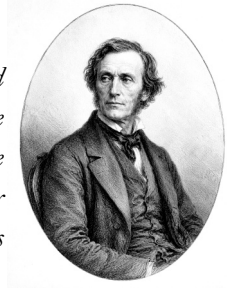
Fragment Vernalia are a record of three separate accounts, recorded by the same hand. The accounts are rendered here without apparent emotion — whether this reflects the author's disposition or his discretion, I cannot determine. I have, as before, rendered them as best suits. I confess I could not detect, in the original, whether the author wished to condemn, to intervene, or something else entirely. I have not tried to supply what he did not. Pomfret is the name in older times for Pontefract.

The final extract differs from the others: it is neither confession, nor lament, nor record of others' conduct. It is, as best I can determine, a private account of an encounter.

A reader of history will recall the charges brought against the Order by the French crown in 1307 included, among other accusations, that of sodomy. The right minded have dismissed these as fabrication — the instruments of a king seeking the Order's wealth and finding accusation cheaper than argument. The brothers of Neusum, it seems, were not without their interior lives. I think Philip's spies, had they ridden north, might have found much to interest them. I think also that they would have found nothing — nothing at all — that was not entirely human..

A note on the translator

Edmund Reginald Vane (1848–1901) was educated at Rugby and Pembroke College, Cambridge, where he read Classics and Medieval History under some distinction. He was widely expected to receive a junior fellowship in 1873. He did not. The circumstances were not publicly recorded.



He spent the following decades in modest private scholarship, supporting himself in part through the restoration and rebinding of books for country house libraries and the collections of minor clergy. It was in the course of such work — repairing the spine of a deteriorated liturgical volume acquired from a dissolved Yorkshire estate — that he discovered the verses here presented, sealed between layers of the original boards, written in a hand he dated to the early thirteenth century.

Vane published sporadically in the years that followed — brief notes in obscure philological journals, one slim pamphlet on northern medieval dialect, privately printed in 1881 and largely ignored. He never married. He lived latterly in lodgings in Shrewsbury, where he is understood to have followed the career of Mr Oscar Wilde with feelings he did not record and which we need not speculate upon.

He died in 1901, the year of the old Queen's death, leaving his papers to no institution. This translation was found among them by a great nephew.



*This emerges from a historically-grounded but fictional universe created by artist Jon Eland exploring hypothetical queer lives circa 1226 at the Knight's Templar preceptory at Neusum — now Temple Newsam, Leeds. The pamphlet, its translator and the origin manuscript are all inventions.