

# Filologia

## Antica e Moderna

n.s. IV, 1  
(XXXII, 53)  
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faem



# **Filologia**

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n.s. IV, 1  
(XXXII, 53)

**2022**

**Lirica. Forme e temi, persistenze  
e discontinuità - I**

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Jasmine Bria

## Lyric features in the Old English *Seafarer*

One of the most engaging and enigmatic Old English poems, *The Seafarer* has always been presented as an interesting challenge for scholars and readers. One hundred and twenty-four alliterative lines mingling eschatological, heroic and homiletic themes, the poem is extant in single copy on folia 81r-83v in the *Exeter Book*<sup>1</sup>, among a variety of other short and long poems in Old English. It can be described somehow simplistically as a first-person verse narration on the struggles of a voluntary exile sailing on a stormy sea, culminating in an evaluation about the transience of earthly existence, compared to the eternal life offered by the Christian God.

The poem has always elicited critical approval for its literary value, but, over the past century and a half, scholars have explored many textual and paratextual questions. A taxonomic attribution to a specific poetic genre has been discussed profusely: generally included inside that restricted group of poems usually labelled as Old English elegies<sup>2</sup>, *The*

<sup>1</sup> Exeter, Cathedral Library MS 3501, end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century. For a detailed description of the manuscript see B.J. Muir, *The Exeter Anthology of Old English Poetry*, Exeter, University of Exeter Press, 2002. The text of *The Seafarer* and, unless otherwise stated, all Old English poems are cited from *The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records: A Collective Edition* (hereby *ASPR*), I- VI, edited by G.P. Krapp and E.V.K. Dobbie, New York, Columbia University Press, 1931-1953.

<sup>2</sup> Old English elegies should not be perceived as particularly comparable to Classical elegies, they are clearly not composed in the elegiac couplet, nor they can be classified as commemorative or funeral poetry. Greenfield defined the Old English elegy as «a relatively

*Seafarer* has also been ascribed to the *planctus* genre, read as wisdom poetry, and interpreted as an Old English form of *peregrinatio*<sup>3</sup>. A theme of deep debate has been the seeming inconsistency in tone and mood. Several critics have found it useful to divide the poem into three sections for analysis: ll. 1-33a form a coherent narrative sequence on their own, developing a tale of overwhelming hardship; ll. 33b-66a constitute a second section mostly devoted to strengthening a comparison between life at sea and life on land; and ll. 66b-124 are mainly concerned with a meditation on the transience of life, with homiletic and eschatological purposes<sup>4</sup>. The poem starts with the speaking subject proclaiming, through a conventional opening line, his intentions to relate his experience on the sea (ll. 1-3). Adopting a highly evocative imagery, he describes his fights against cold, hunger, loneliness and the dangers of a stormy sea, repeatedly pointing out how people on land cannot understand his woes (ll. 4-33). Yet, no matter the adversities on the sea and the pleasures on land, a seafarer's soul always yearns for the maritime life, always willing to go back (ll. 33b-64a). On line 64b, the speaking voice suddenly changes his tune: any existence on land is felt by as dead and the only consolation is offered by the joys deriving from God. Thus, the third part of the poem appears to be a meditation on the transience of worldly matters: because life is intrinsically unstable a man should strive for everlasting glory (ll. 64b-104). At this point, the narrator explains God's magnificence and the

short reflective or dramatic poem embodying a contrasting pattern of loss and consolation, ostensibly based upon a specific personal experience or observation, and expressing an attitude towards that experience». S.B. Greenfield, *The Old English Elegies*, in *Hero and Exile: The Art of Old English Poetry*, edited by G. Brown, London, The Hambledon Press, 1989, p. 94. For an in-depth discussion on the genre see also A. Klinck, *The Old English Elegies: A Critical Edition and Genre Study*, Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001, pp. 221-252.

<sup>3</sup> See, respectively, R. Woolf, *The Wanderer, the Seafarer, and the Genre of Planctus*, in *Anglo-Saxon Poetry: Essays in Appreciation for John C. McGalliard*, edited by E. Nicholson and D. Warwick Frese, Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1975, pp. 192-207; T.A. Shippey, *The Wanderer and The Seafarer as wisdom poetry*, in *Companion to Old English Poetry*, edited by H. Aertsen and R.H. Bremmer Jr., Amsterdam, Vrije University Press, 1994, pp. 145-158; D. Whitelock, *The interpretation of The Seafarer*, in *Early Cultures of North-West Europe*, edited by C. Fox and B. Dickins, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1950, pp. 261-272.

<sup>4</sup> See P. Orton, *The Form and Structure of The Seafarer*, in *Old English Literature: Critical Essays*, edited by R.M. Liuzza, New Haven & London, Yale University Press, p. 356.



Christian virtues that can gain His favour. The poem concludes with a homiletical exhortation: human beings must consider where their 'real' home is and how they can go there, striving for eternal grace and giving thanks to God (ll.106-124).

Many earlier scholars, because of the abrupt shift in tone and the conflicting ideas expressed by the speaking subject, questioned the text's compositional unity, leading to many suggested readings to explain it: from the hypothesis of a dialogue between two speakers to the idea that the poem was constructed out of two sections, one originally 'pagan' and a second addition influenced by Christianity<sup>5</sup>. Nowadays, however, the unity of the poem is no longer questioned; it is generally acknowledged that the text is built on a logic of contrasts among the semantic units, incorporating repetition and variation<sup>6</sup>, and thus is better explained by a symbolic reading, in which the sea-journey has a deeper, spiritual value<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> In 1869 Rieger saw the work as a dramatic dialogue, interpreting the text as a conversation between an elderly, disillusioned seaman and a youthful, passionate, and still inexperienced man [see M. Rieger, *Der Seefahrer als Dialog hergestellt*, «Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie» (from now on «ZfdPh») I, pp. 334-339]; more recently, this proposal was firstly reprised and then retracted by Pope [see J. Pope, *Dramatic voices in The Wanderer and The Seafarer*, in *Franciplegius: Medieval and Linguistic Studies in Honor of Francis Peabody Magoun, Jr.*, edited by J.B. Bessinger Jr. and R.P. Creed, New York, New York University Press, 1965, pp. 164-193 and *Second thoughts on the interpretation of The Seafarer*, «Anglo-Saxon England» (from now on «ASE») III, 1974, pp. 75-86]. Drawing from Rieger's hypothesis, there have been many advocates for the assumption of the poem's composite origin. See, among many, F. Kluge, *Zu altenglischen Dichtungen. I. Der Seefahrer*, «Englische Studien» VI, 1883, pp. 322-327; C. Boer, *Wanderer und Seefahrer*, «ZfdPh» XXXV, 1903, pp. 1-28.

<sup>6</sup> In his *Image, Metaphor, Irony, Allusion, and Moral: The Shifting Perspective of 'The Seafarer'*, «Neuphilologische Mitteilungen» (from now on «NM») LXVII (3), 1966, pp. 266-282, N. Isaacs argued profusely for the integrity of the text from a stylistic point of view.

<sup>7</sup> In 1909 Ehrismann remarked how the Christian aspects could and should be considered as intrinsic to the work rather than as an addition (see G. Ehrismann, *Religionsgeschichtliche Beiträge zum germanischen Frühchristentum*, «Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur» XXXV, 1909, pp. 213-218). Nowadays, any interpretative input on *The Seafarer* is primarily based on the identification of the specific incidence of the realistic features in the symbolic structure. For instance, Anderson sees the contrast in the first half of the poem as an opposition between two ideas: «the idea of life as a hard, lonely voyage, the misery of which he [the poet] stresses further by his references to the closeness of the cliffs and to the wintry season, and the idea of death as a voyage that will set him free from the bondage of his earthly existence» (O.S. Anderson, *The Seafarer: An Interpretation*, «K. Humanistika Vetenskapssamfundets i Lund Årsberättelse» 1937-1938, pp. 15-16). On the other hand, in 1950, Whitelock's pivotal reading of the poem (*The Interpretation... cit.*, pp. 261-72) turned on its

– images of life as a journey, and, more specifically, as a voyage over the sea, are common in patristic writing<sup>8</sup>. Nonetheless, the timeless and intensely human situation depicted, that so much captivated modern sensibilities, can easily be read figuratively without dismissing the poem's literal level.

In her pivotal study *The Lyric Speaker in Old English Poetry*, Bragg attempts to come up with a definition of the lyrical form for Old English authors<sup>9</sup>: while describing lyric poetry as «the evanescent, magical verbal art that occurs in the world of relationship, the relationship between the speaker and the reader»<sup>10</sup>, she argues that medieval lyric can be distinguished from other medieval literary genres because of «the subjectivity of the speaker», that it to say «the speaker's conception of her-, him-, or itself as a *subject*, an I»<sup>11</sup>.

head the Christian premise of the allegorical reading, identifying the speaking subject as the historical figure of the *peregrinus* who journeys the seas to seek eternal life in the heavenly realm. Allegorical readings of the text are proposed also, among many others, by G.V. Smithers, *The meaning of The Seafarer and The Wanderer, Part I* in «*MÆ*» XXVI, 1957, pp. 137-153, and *Part II*, in «*MÆ*» XXVIII, 1959, pp. 1-22; D.G. Calder, *Setting and mode in The Seafarer and The Wanderer*, «*NM*» 72, 1971, pp. 264-75. For a more in-depth examination of the main studies on the subject, see C. Cucina, *Il Seafarer: La navigatio cristiana di un poeta anglosassone*, Roma, Edizioni Kappa, 2008, pp. 115-151.

<sup>8</sup> In the early third century, Tertullian (*De baptismo*, XII) interprets the ship in trouble water in Matthew 8.23-37 as a figuration of the Church; according to Cyprian (*De mortalitate*, XXVI), death for Christians is only one journey toward their true home; while Augustine (*De cantico novo*, II) uses the image of the stormy sea to describe the temporal life. See, on this, among others Smithers, *The meaning...* cit., pp. 1-5 and Klinck, *Old English Elegies...* cit., p. 38.

<sup>9</sup> See L. Bragg, *The Lyric Speakers of Old English Poetry*, London, Associated University Presses, 1991, pp. 19-24. The three Old English words for 'poem' did not tell us much about distinctions in genre: *gyd* may refer to «an elegy, moral tale, maxim, or parable», thus can be defined as brief work of verbal art; similarly *leoð* may be either «an aphoristic or lyric poem», while *sang* refers to «anything that is sung or chanted». See R.E. Parker, *Gyd, leoð and sang in Old English Poetry*, «*Tennessee Studies in Literature*» I, 1956, pp. 59-63.

<sup>10</sup> Bragg, *The Lyric Speakers...* cit., p. 19.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23. Modern understanding of the first person voice in the Middle Ages is somehow limited and should be better expanded: it is generally assumed that mediaeval literature prefers to represent the human experience in its archetypal form, that is to say, the lyrical persona, while speaking of emotions and internal experiences was expected to be representative of mankind. On the question of the authenticity of first-person narration in the Middle Ages and on the difference between an 'Empirical' I and a 'Poetic' I, see L. Spitzer, *Note on the Poetic and the Empirical 'I' in Medieval Authors*, «*Traditio*» IV, 1946, pp. 414-422 and E. Birge Vitz, *The I of the Roman de la Rose*, «*Genre*» VII, 1973, pp. 49-75.

Inserted perfectly in this definition of Old English lyric, *The Seafarer*, proclaims the centrality of the speaking subject's personal experience. The opening resorts to a sample of traditional diction<sup>12</sup>, pointing immediately out themes and expectations for the audience:

Mæg ic be me sylfum soðgied wrecan,  
siþas secgan (*Sfr.*, ll. 1-2a)

[I will sing a song about myself, tell of my voyages]<sup>13</sup>.

Thus, reading as a soliloquy or as a monologue, the poem could also be somehow classified as a lyric of personal expression, an *ante-litteram* representation of what was defined *poetry of experience*, a lyric subgenre described by Langbaum<sup>14</sup>, who noted the affinities between lyric poetry and the dramatic monologue. According to this definition, the dramatic monologue is a song-like form of self-expression, exploring the personality of a character; it is usually gratuitous – in the sense that the speaker has no external motivation to utter the speech – and static – in the sense that it doesn't make the plot evolve. The connection with this definition of the dramatic monologue as poetry of experience and Old English short poems like *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer* was noted by Spolsky, who, in particular, read *The Seafarer* as a peculiar form of traditional lyric in that the internal monologue is used to pursue rather than to expand a meaning, considering it as «evidence of a mind working toward a confirmation of a position somewhat equivocally felt in the beginning»<sup>15</sup>. Drawing on Whitelock's *The Interpretation of The Seafarer*, Spolsky identifies the lyrical 'I' as a voluntary exile, a peregrinus, who makes a penitential

<sup>12</sup> Similar expressions can be found in *Deor* (l. 35), *Widsith* (l. 50), *Resignation* (ll. 96b-97); particularly interesting, though, is the affinity with the opening of *The Wife's Lament* (ll. 1-2a): «Ic þis giedd wrece bi me ful geomorre, / minre sylfe siþ» 'I sing this song about my wretched self, my own journey'. On the particularities of formulaic diction in *The Seafarer* see J.M. Foley, *Genre(s) in the Making: Diction, Audience and Text in the Old English Seafarer*, «Poetic Today» IV (4), 1983, pp. 683-706, precisely pp. 687-688.

<sup>13</sup> All translations from Old English are mine unless otherwise stated.

<sup>14</sup> See R. Langbaum, *The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition*, New York, Norton Library, 1957, pp. 183-191.

<sup>15</sup> E. Spolsky, *Old English Lyric Poetry*, PhD. Diss., Indiana University, 1968, p. 35.

journey towards a foreigner's land in search for his heavenly reward, sacrificing all his worldly comfort; but, while accepting this possible reading, she questioned, with Greenfield<sup>16</sup>, the narrative voice's motivations, recognizing in both halves of the poem a number of expressions – manifested especially in ll. 39-57 – that convey an ambiguous stance toward the purposed journey, both hesitant and eager. In this sense, the poem could be interpreted as an internal discourse, a negotiation among different ideas and emotions, some form of rationalization<sup>17</sup>.

Nonetheless, reading *The Seafarer* simply as a fictional discourse can make the reader overlook fundamental features of the poem. As purported by Culler, in its attempt to formulate a new theory in order to define lyric poetry, when treating lyric poems as dramatic monologue, «the reader looks for a speaker who can be treated as a character in a novel, whose situation and motives one must reconstruct»<sup>18</sup>. This paradigm, while certainly useful, as a matter of fact, might lead toward a disregard for all those lyric features not present in normal speech's acts, such as meter, rhyme or refrain. According to Culler's theory, lyric is not fictional discourse but a disquisition about the world, thus he acknowledges that poems can contain narrative elements – representations of characters and events labelled as 'fictional elements' – but he contends that these elements are always in tension with 'ritualistic' aspects of the text, defined as the «formal elements that provide meaning and structure and serve as instructions for performance»<sup>19</sup>, which essentially are the rhetorical, semantic and symbolic features of the poem. While analysing Browning's *Porphyria's Lover*, Culler points out how the 'ritualistic' elements of poetry can easily be overlooked when using an exclusively narrative perspective:

It is quite a tour de force to make highly rhymed four-beat verse seem remotely like the mimesis of speech, and the tension between the ritualistic and the fictional

<sup>16</sup> See S.B. Greenfield, *Attitudes and Values in The Seafarer*, «Studies in Philology» LI (1), 1954, pp. 15-20.

<sup>17</sup> Spolsky explains: «One might say that the speaker feels called upon to defend his intention to make the proposed Journey in spite of the hesitancy he obviously feels. This defence is ostensibly to listeners but as the poem develops seems to be more to himself». Spolsky, *Old English Lyric...* cit., p. 32.

<sup>18</sup> J. Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, Cambridge, London, Harvard University Press, 2015, p. 2.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

thus remains centrally at work in the dramatic monologues. Readers cope with it by breaking the artifice of the poem and concentrating on the fictional speaker, whom by convention we treat as if *not* speaking in verse<sup>20</sup>.

In the case of *The Seafarer*, concentrating of the fictional speaker led to repeated attempts of identification: as mentioned, Whitelock saw the speaker as a voluntary exile, a pilgrim, ready to depart in a voyage *pro amore Dei*, but the seafarer has been identified, to mention only a few examples among many, as a sinner facing a penitential journey, as the figure for man in a Postlapsarian universe, as a soul who yearns for the afterlife after the death of the body or as a fisherman spending his winter nights in solitude meditating on certain Christian values<sup>21</sup>. Yet, regardless of any accurate definition of the fictional coordinates of the text, the poem, in a precisely balanced use of conventional features and elements of originality, manages to convey an intensely human emotional experience. Therefore, in the assumption that the formal elements of lyric poetry concur to define this emotional experience, the aim of this paper is to address the lyric elements of *The Seafarer*, its rhetoric, semantic and symbolic features, in order to expand our understanding of the processes used by *The Seafarer*, as a lyric poem, to generate meanings, that is to say, to better appreciate how the poem works.

An analysis of the formal or ‘ritualistic’ features in Old English poems needs clearly to be based on specific considerations: it is crucial to understand the peculiarities and core aspects of the Old English poetic language and metrical system – *i.e.* analogies and kennings, variations, lexical parallels, repetitions, formulaic pattern and meter – in order to recognize and appreciate *The Seafarer*’s author’s ability to reshape the traditional stylistic features of Old English verse, skilfully balancing between technical adherence and creative innovation.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 269.

<sup>21</sup> See, respectively, Smithers, *The meaning... cit.*; J.F. Vickrey, *The Seafarer 12-17, 25-30, 55-70: Dives and the Fictive Speaker*, «Studia Neophilologica» LXI, 1989, pp. 145-156; F.S. Holton, *Old English Sea Imagery and the Interpretation of ‘The Seafarer’*, «The Yearbook of English Studies» XII, 1982, pp. 208-217; S.I. Sobecki, *The interpretation of The Seafarer - a re-examination of the pilgrimage theory*, «Neophilologus» XCII, 2008, pp. 127-139.

The poem operates on a contrastive structure, as it is organised on a conscious «aesthetic design»<sup>22</sup> relying on a complex system of semantic units, developed around repetitions and variations, which opposes contrasting images and models of life, eventually leading toward a confrontation between societal and religious values<sup>23</sup>. Therefore, the text is structured around a rich tapestry of lexical correspondences and much of the composition's rhetorical strategy is entrusted to specific choices in diction that give rise to a dense polysemic poem.

Initially, the main polarity of the poem appears to be a comparison between the difficult life at sea with the quiet or carefree days experienced on land. Therefore, the first nineteen lines of the poem are built on a verbal play of echoes and repetition that functions as a way to emphasise the adverse natural condition and psychological distress experienced by the lyrical 'I'. The harshness of the winter season is emphasised with the reiteration of *cald* and *ceald* 'cold'<sup>24</sup>, related in variation with many terms identifying natural elements connected with wintertime such as *frost*, 'frost', *hrīm-gicel*, 'icicle', *hægl* 'hail'. The detailed depiction of life at sea ties the external challenges of the winter season with emotional pain: alliteration binds *cald* with the semantic pregnant word *caru*, 'sorrow, care, anxiety'<sup>25</sup> (l. 10) and the derived adjective *cearig* (l. 14)<sup>26</sup>. Com-

<sup>22</sup> Isaacs, *Image, Metaphor...* cit., p. 268.

<sup>23</sup> Arguing for a moral and philosophical reading of the text, Isaacs recognises the expertise in the rhetorical art of the poet: «Skilfully and subtly the Seafarer-poet goes about his business; his purpose is philosophical, his philosophy is traditionally Christian, and his method is ingenious. He employs elements and techniques which we recognize as staples of modern poetry – image, metaphor, irony, allusion – along with that ubiquitous element of medieval Christian poetry – the moral – to lead us inevitably through his constantly shifting perspectives to the final fixed morality of his message». *Ibid.*, p. 268.

<sup>24</sup> As both adjective and noun, *ceald* is used four times in the first nineteen lines: l. 8b «calde»; l. 10a «caldum»; l. 14b «iscealdne»; l. 19a «is-cealdne».

<sup>25</sup> Definitions of Old English words from A to I are taken from the *Dictionary of Old English: A to I online*, edited by A. Cameron *et al.*, Dictionary of Old English Project, Toronto, 2018 <https://tapor.library.utoronto.ca/doi/> [accessed on 16/01/2023; henceforth *DOE*]; all the other headwords are referenced, instead, from *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, based on the manuscript collection of the Late Joseph Bosworth, enlarged Addenda and Corrigenda by Alistair Campbell of the Supplement by T. Northcote Toller, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1898-1978 [accessed on 16/01/2023; henceforth *ASD*].

<sup>26</sup> Line 14 associates, in a compound word, *cearig* 'full of care; sorrowful, anxious, troubled' with another adjective with contiguous connotations *earn* 'poor, miserable, wretched'.

pound words revolving around the idea of sorrow are closely employed in ll. 4a and 5b: *brēost-caru*, ‘sorrow of the heart, innermost anxiety’, describes a painful condition implying both physical and mental connotations<sup>27</sup>, while the *hapax car-seld* ‘abode of sorrow’ or ‘hall of pain’ has been described as an ironic metaphor, overturning the usual positive connotations associated with *seld* ‘seat, residence, hall’<sup>28</sup>.

Bitre breostceare gebiden hæbbe,  
 gecunnad in ceole cearselda fela,  
 atol yþa gewealc, þær mec oft bigeat  
 nearo nihtwaco æt nacan stefnan,  
 þonne he be clifum cnessað (*Sfr*, ll. 4-8a)

[I have suffered bitter sorrows of the heart, in the keel I explored many halls of pain and the frightening stirring of the waves, where the oppressing night-watch often snatched me at the stem of the ship, when it tossed against the cliffs.]

This correlation between the representation of the individual’s inner state and the description of the natural context is a recurrent poetic technique in Old English poetry<sup>29</sup>: both the nocturnal and winter aspects of

Such a composite adjective, as the only other occurrence in the Old English poetic corpus, can be similarly found in the thematically close *The Wanderer* (l. 20). It denotes a mental state of sadness. I.L. Gordon (*The Seafarer*, London, Methuen, 1960, p. 34) specifies «sorrowful because of my wretched state»; while *DOE* defines it as «wretched and sorrowful».

<sup>27</sup> Cucina (*Il Seafarer... cit.*, p. 46), similarly to the *DOE* definition, explains *brēost-caru* as a sorrow of the heart («afflizione dell’animo, affanno del cuore»), but specifies that it denotes a pain (*caru*) weighing down on the chest («pena, dolore che opprime il petto»), as the seat of all human vital and emotional impulses. *The Wife’s Lament* l. 44b records the other occurrence in Old English. Yet, associated with the adjective *biter*, here taking on the sense of ‘painful, difficult to bear’ [see. C. Riviello, *Modalità di rappresentazione del dolore in alcune elegie anglosassoni*, «AION - Sezione Germanica» XXI (1-2), 2011, pp. 259-308, esp. 283], the poetical compound can be also found in the Old Saxon poem, *Heliand* (ll. 4032b-33a): «than ni thorfli ik nu sulic harm tholon, / bittra breostkara» ‘then I would have never had to suffer such pain, this bitter sorrow of the heart’ [text cited from O. Behaghel (ed.), *Heliand und Genesis*, Tübingen, Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1984 (1 ed. 1882), p. 144].

<sup>28</sup> As Gordon (*The Seafarer... cit.*, p. 33) notes: «just as *meduseld* in *Beowulf* is a place where mead is to be had, *cearseld* is a place where sorrow is to be had».

<sup>29</sup> On this, Stanley’s and Greenfield’s observations on diction and motifs in Old English poetry remain relevant to this day. See E.G. Stanley, *Old English Poetic Diction and the Interpretation of The Wanderer, The Seafarer and The Penitent’s Prayer*, «Anglia» LXXIII,

the scene take on an emotional negative value, enhancing the depiction of the endured pain. By placing a solitary man amid a frost-bound cold landscape, the poet is emphasising and objectifying his difficulties<sup>30</sup>. The inner emotional experience appears as perfectly merged with the external world, to the point where the narrator's anguish finds an objective justification in the description of the hostile nature<sup>31</sup>. Then, the highly metaphorical diction intensifies the vividness of the portrayed scene:

Calde geþrunge  
 wæron mine fet, forste gebunden,  
 caldum clommu, þær þa ceare seofedun  
 hat ymb heortan; hungor innan slat  
 merewerges mod. (*Sfr*, ll. 8b-12a)

[My feet were oppressed by cold, bound by frost, by cold chains, where these pains sighed warm around the heart; hunger teared from inside the sea-weary mind]

Associated to fetters by, firstly, the metaphorical use of the verb *gebindan*, reaffirmed in variation with *cald clām*, frost and cold are depicted as an oppressing force, limiting the action of the seafarer – *fēt* being a pars-pro-toto synecdoche<sup>32</sup>. The poet then employs one after

1955, pp. 413- 466 and S.B. Greenfield, *The Formulaic Expression of the Theme of 'Exile' in Anglo-Saxon Poetry*, «Speculum» XXX (2), 1955, pp. 200-206.

<sup>30</sup> According to Neville, depicting the natural environment as hostile serves to define humanity's sphere of action: horrible weather, raging storms, and indifferent animals, as mentioned in *The Seafarer*, reflect the human race's powerless position against the stronger forces of the natural world (see J. Neville, *Representations of the Natural World in Old English Poetry*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999, esp. pp. 36-46). Similarly, though, personification of natural condition is a *topos* that could be found also in Latin authors, as analysed by B.K. Martin, *Aspects of Winter in Latin and Old English Poetry*, «The Journal of English and Germanic Philology» LXVIII (3), 1969, pp. 375-390.

<sup>31</sup> On the stylistic correlation among internal sufferings and extreme natural conditions in Old English poetry, see also C. Riviello, “*To gesiþþe sorge ond longað wintercearig, uhtceare*”: *la concreta fisicità del dolore nelle elegie anglosassoni*, «AION - Sezione Germanica» XXII (1-2), 2012, pp. 173-205, esp. pp. 184-186.

<sup>32</sup> Frost appears in collocation with binding and fettering in others Old English poems, i.e.: *Beowulf* (l. 1609a), *Maxims I* (l.75a) and *Menologium* (l. 205a). According to Cavell, prison and binding imagery are generally employed because of a general focus on the trapped state of humanity, fighting alone against the natural elements in the Postlapsarian universe as a consequence for the Original Sin. See M. Cavell, *Weaving Words and Binding Bodies*:



another two phrases in which a verbal action normally performed by an animated subject is, instead, referred to an inanimate subject. The verb *seōfian*, ‘to lament, to groan, to sigh’, is used in connection with a psychological state, carrying over to the cares clamping the heart the sense of oppression linked with the cold-fetters metaphor, while simultaneously introducing a polarity of cold-hot: the metaphorical plan is thus also involved through the attribution of a symbolic meaning to the adjective *hāt*<sup>33</sup>. In the following phrase, instead, the grammatical subject is *hungor*, an involuntary physiological sensation, which performs the act of *slītan*, ‘to tear’, referring to a semantically abstract object, *mere-wērig mōd*<sup>34</sup>. The metaphorical plane lends a spiritual meaning to the noun *hungor*, which here relates to the individual’s interiority, to the soul prostrated by the life of affliction that the sea journey represents for the Christian man. The poet has chosen here to correlate words that draw on contrasting fields of meaning: materiality on one hand and abstraction on the other, realism on one hand and allegory on the other<sup>35</sup>.

On line 14, a first change of scenery irrupts into the poem’s imagery, the life of people on land not in the know about the seafarer’s life is introduced as a pole of comparison: the *comitatus* society is subtly inserted in the frame of reference, favouring the building up of the contrastive relationship between the depiction of sea and land. Images are alternated

*The Poetics of Human Experience in Old English Literature*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2016, p. 108.

<sup>33</sup> Most cultures employ a pattern of imagery in which heat or cold, primarily, reflect differing degrees of emotional intensity. Nonetheless, in Anglo-Saxon and other medieval literatures can be traced another pattern of imagery in which heat and cold may indicate moral meaning. In particular, there are many biblical and patristical examples. Thus, here, the hot-cold polarity might also be connected to the contrast between the heat radiated by love as charity and the freezing cold of unrepentant sin. See T.D. Hill, *The Tropological Context of Heat and Cold Imagery in Anglo-Saxon Poetry*, «NM» LXIX (4), 1968, pp. 522-532.

<sup>34</sup> Similarly, depicting human’s condition after Adam’s sin, *Genesis B* employs this blunt and straightforward representation of hunger, which is typical to Old English literature: «nu slit me hunger and þurst / bite on breostum» ‘now hunger and thirst are tearing at my breasts’ (ll. 802b-803a). Text cited from A.N. Doane, *The Saxon Genesis: An Edition of the West Saxon Genesis B and the Old Saxon Vatican Genesis*, Madison, The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991, p. 229). See H. Magennis, *Anglo-Saxon Appetites: Food and Drink and Their Consumption in Old English and Related Literature*, Dublin, Four Court Press, 1999, p. 44.

<sup>35</sup> See Isaacs, *Image, Metaphor...* cit., pp. 269-271 and Cucina, *Il Seafarer...* cit., p. 339.

moving rapidly from one ambient to the other, helping in building this thematic opposition that forms the backbone of the text until line 64a. The comparison is implemented by many rhetorical strategies among which lexical correspondences are key factors. The reprise of a previously used word is essential also in structuring the ideal movement of the poem, which shifts from an individual perspective to a more general vision of the human condition. Thus, for instance, the reiteration of lexically related *gebīdan* and *bīdan*, incidentally or deliberately, is used to connote at first, as seen, the painful experience of the lyrical ‘I’ constrained by the cold (l. 10b «forste gebunden»), then, it is employed with contrastive intents to describe the man who resides in the city (l. 28a, «gebiden in burgum») and the sense of obligation felt by the seafarer to continue traveling the sea (l. 30 «in brimlade bidan sceolde»)<sup>36</sup>. Similarly, ll. 17 and 32 are elaborated on a play of references around *hrīm* ‘frost’ and *hægl* ‘hail’, that would seem to emphasise the harshness of the natural elements faced by the narrator during his sea-voyage:

bihongen hrimgicelum; hægl scurum fleag.  
 þær ic ne gehyrde butan hlimman sæ (*Sfr*, ll. 17-18)

[surrounded by rimy icicles; hail flew through the storm. There I heard nothing but the thrumming sea]

Nap nihtscua, norþan sniwde,  
 hrim hrusan bond, hægl feol on eorþan,  
 corna caldast. (*Sfr*; ll. 31-33a)

[The night shadow darkens, it snowed from the north, binding the earth in ice, hail, the coldest of grains, fell to the ground.]

Thus, while in l. 17a icicles envelope personally the speaking subject, evoked again on l. 32, *hrīm* binds the whole earth. The device is repeated immediately in the next hemistich, since *hægl*, which before was associated with the sea (l. 17b), now is described as falling on earth. The formulaic kenning presented in variation on l. 33a denotes *hægl* as the

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 342.

‘coldest of grains’. Albeit not unique to Old English poetry<sup>37</sup>, the metaphor here is interesting because it transports the element characterizing the experience on the sea to land, and because crops are image of fertility, the kenning highlights paradoxically the sterility of hail<sup>38</sup>.

Another rhetorical strategy widely employed in the poem to build further parallels and associations is a wise use of alliteration. The previously seen ll. 17-18, for instance, show the perpetuation of the *h*- phoneme for alliteration in both lines (*hrīm*, *haegl*, *gehyrde*), closely relating the two verses. Similarly, the preceding lines (15-16) are isolated by deliberate metrical choices.

winter wunade wræccan lastum,  
winemægum bidroren (*Sfr.*, ll. 15-16)

[I endured winter on the paths of exile, deprived of dear kinsmen]

Employing highly conventional diction, the *w*- alliteration in l. 15 links wintertime with the condition of the exile<sup>39</sup>, while the following colon reprising the same phoneme, adds an extra allusion to the separation from the «winemægum», the beloved kinsmen. The isolated hemistich of l. 16 is to be considered a prosodic exception intentionally inserted by the author<sup>40</sup> and the pair of verses is meant to be a major metric-semantic unit which, while disrupting the usual binary rhythm, focused the attention towards the exile’s condition.

<sup>37</sup> For instance, the Norwegian *Rune Poem* on l. 7 reads: «hagall er kaldastr korna» ‘hail is the coldest of grain’. It might be that such images were common throughout the Germanic world, spread out thanks to the acrophonic nature of the runic system. For an edition and English translation of the poem, see the Appendix in M. Halsall, *The Old English Rune Poem: a critical edition*, Toronto, Buffalo, London, University of Toronto Press, 1981, pp. 181-186.

<sup>38</sup> See Isaacs, *Image, Metaphor...* cit., p. 272.

<sup>39</sup> Similarly, the cold winter sea is evoked in association with the exile’s track in first lines of *The Wanderer* (ll. 1-5a): «Oft him anhaga are gebideð / metudes miltse, þeah þe he modcearig / geond lagulade longe sceolde / hreran mid hondum hrimcealde sæ / wadan wræclastas» ‘Often the lonely-wanderer finds favour, God’s mercy, even if, pained in the heart, he has long had to go through the ways of the sea, to move with his hands the icy waters, to walk the paths of exile’.

<sup>40</sup> See Cucina, *Il Seafarer...* cit., p. 380.

The immediately following auidial imagery functions, instead, as diversion and consolation for the loneliness experienced by the speaker:

Hwilum ylfete song  
 dyde ic me to gomene, ganetes hleoþor  
 ond huilpan sweg fore hleahtor werā,  
 mæw singende fore medodrince. (*Sfr*; ll.19b-22)

[For amusement, sometimes I took the swan's song, the gannet's cry and the waterbird's voice for the laughter of men, the seagull's singing for the drinking of mead.]

Hearing nothing but the sea resounding, the seafarer ironically evokes his former existence among men on land, thus, while mew's singing becomes a substitute for mead drinking (l. 22), lines 20-21 display one of the several instances of metric enjambment in the poem<sup>41</sup>: crucially, the *h*-sound links the gannet's cry («ganetes hleoþor») and the waterbird's voice («huilpan sweg») to the imagined laughter of men («hleahtor werā»).

The second section of the text (ll. 34b-64b) builds on this isolated-life-at-sea vs. communal-life-on-land comparison, showing in the speaking subject an attitude which, as seen, has led to many different readings. Nonetheless, ll. 34b-57 reveals, firstly and foremost, the poet's accuracy in delivering the inner stirrings and mental troubles of the speaking subjects. Despite raising unavoidable anxieties, returning to the sea is an internal urge, a voluntary motion of the heart:

Forþon cnysað nu  
 heortan geþohtas, þæt ic hean streamas,  
 sealtyþa gelac sylf cunnige;  
 monað modes lust mæla gehwylce  
 ferð to feran, þæt ic feor heonan  
 elþeodigra eard gesece.  
 Forþon nis þæs modwlonc mon ofer eorþan,  
 ne his gifena þæs god, ne in geoguþe to þæs hwæt,

<sup>41</sup> A metric enjambement occurs when the phoneme of the final arsis in a line is reiterated as the alliterating phoneme for the next line. This characteristic, not unusual in Old English poetry, is particularly present in *The Seafarer*. It has been explained as a technique to connect closely one line to the other. See *Ibid.*, pp. 375-377.

ne in his dædum to þæs deor,    ne him his dryhten to þæs hold,  
 þæt he a his sæfore    sorge næbbe,  
 to hwon hine dryhten    gedon wille.  
 Ne biþ him to hearpan hyge    ne to hringþege,  
 ne to wife wyn    ne to worulde hyht,  
 ne ymbe owiht elles,    nefne ymb yða gewealc,  
 ac a hafað longunge    se þe on lagu fundað.  
 Bearwas blostmum nimað,    byrig fægriað,  
 wongas wlitigað,    woruld onetteð;  
 ealle þa gemoniað    modes fusne  
 sefan to siþe,    þam þe swa þenceð  
 on flodwegas    feor gewitan.  
 Swylce geac monað    geomran reorde,  
 singeð sumeres weard,    sorge beodeð  
 bitter in breosthord.    þæt se beorn ne wat,  
 esteadig secg,    hwæt þa sume dreogað  
 þe þa wræclastas    widost lecgað. (*Sfr.*, ll. 34b-57)

[And yet, now thoughts stir the heart, so that I myself seek out the deep streams, the turmoil of salty waves; my mind's desire at every turn exhorts the spirit to depart, so that I should seek a foreigner's land far from here. Thus, there is no man so proud of heart in this earth, nor so assured in his gifts, nor so strong in youth, nor so daring in deeds, nor his lord so gracious to him, that he will never have some affliction about his seafaring, about whatever the Lord wishes to do to him. For him his mind is not to the harp, nor to taking rings, nor to the pleasure of a woman, nor to the expectations of the world, nor to anything else but the rolling of the waves, but he, who tends towards the waters, ever holds a longing. Woods blossom, towns become fair, fields grew more beautiful, the world hastens; everything exhorts the willing mind, the soul to its travels, him who so imagines on the flood-way to travel far away. Similarly, though the cuckoo admonishes with sad voice, the warden of the summer sings, announces bitter griefs in the treasure of the breast. Men do not know, prosperous people, what those who ride the widest exile-paths fight.]

Immediately obvious is the abundance of terms alluding to the inner self of the speaking subject – *heorte* (l. 34), *mōd* (ll. 36 and 50), *ferð* (l. 37), *hyge* (l. 44), *sefa* (l. 51) –, the poet exploits to its best the lexical richness of Old English diction, in order to portray a mind at odds with itself<sup>42</sup>, a mind

<sup>42</sup> The concept of the 'mind' in Anglo-Saxon culture was probably understood as including intellectual and emotional aspects. Lockett explains it as «that entity that executes all

experimenting opposing emotions, like *sorh* (l. 42) ‘anxiety, sorrow’ and *langung* ‘longing, yearning’ (l. 47). Thus, the language here used appears purposely ambiguous. The speaking subjects works hard in evoking specific images, only to rapidly shifts his perspective on them: the spirit longs for travel, spurning the joys of social life<sup>43</sup>, the pleasures of the warmer seasons incite to set sail, yet the cuckoo admonishes against it.

Thus, the inner impulse to leave is here emphasised by a precise use of phrasal variation. In ll. 37-38, the purpose clause implicit in *fēran* ‘to depart’ is made explicit through the appositive style of the poem: «þæt ic feor heonan elþeodigra eard gesece» ‘so that I should seek a foreigner’s land far from here’. In ll. 39-43, the compound word *sæ-fōr*, a *hapax legomenon* literally denoting a ‘journey by sea’, can be easily interpret metaphorically as a kenning for ‘earthly existence’ or ‘each individual’s unique fate’, with l. 43 explaining in variation what seafaring means in this context: «to hwon hine dryhten gedon wille» ‘whatever the Lord wishes to do to him’<sup>44</sup>.

Furthermore, the poet, once again, carefully plays with lexical references and echoes. *Cnyssað* (l. 34b) reminds of *cnossað* (l. 8a), having both a common radical derivation denoting ‘to beat’, but, while *cnossað*

psychological tasks, including reason, will, deliberation, emotion, contemplation, governance of the body and so on» (L. Lockett, *Anglo-Saxon Psychologies in the Vernacular and Latin Tradition*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2011, p. 34); similarly Mize defines it as «the notional site of consciousness, cognition, emotion, knowledge and memory» (B. Mize, *The Representation of the Mind as an Enclosure in Old English Poetry*, «Anglo-Saxon England» 35, 2006, pp. 57-90, esp. p. 58). *Heorte* (just like *brēost*) is generally understood to define «the physical or metaphysical receptacle of the mind» (A. Harbus, *The Life of the Mind in Old English Poetry*, Amsterdam, Rodopi, 2002, p. 34); *mōd*, *ferð*, *hyge*, *sefa* and the compound *mōd-sefa* are generally used interchangeably and can be translated as ‘mind’, ‘spirit’ or ‘soul’, according to context. Lines 34-57 of *The Seafarer* seem to depict a sort of dislocation of the self from the mind. According to Godden, *ic* might be here almost identified «as that aspect of the self which controls the body’s actions». M. Godden, *Anglo-Saxons on the Mind*, in *Old English Literature: Critical Essays*, edited by R.M. Liuzza, New Haven & London, Yale University Press, p. 306.

<sup>43</sup> Here the poet employs the ‘theme’ of the ‘joy in the hall’ only to negate it in the end. See Foley, *Genre(s) in the Making...* cit., pp. 690-692.

<sup>44</sup> According to Cucina (*Il Seafarer...* cit., p. 361), the similarity in rhetorical construction for both couples of lines strengthens the argumentative discourse in this part of the text: ll. 36-38 emphasise how at the beginning the desire to set sail is completely selfish and personal, while the second variation in ll. 43-44 explicitly reveals the possibility of a symbolic reading of the *sæfore*: the speaking subject might not be a simple sailor, but he could be a Christian man turned into a pilgrim.

alludes to the lashing of the ship that the sea presses against the cliffs, *cnyssað* instead refers to the rhythm of the heart that accelerates with the speaking subject's willingness to sail. Similarly, etymologically linked *monað* (l. 36a and l. 53a) and *gemoniað* (l. 50a) are used to indicate opposite urges: one encourages the departure while the other admonishes against it. Furthermore, the «bitter in breosthord» (l. 55)<sup>45</sup>, defining the anguish inspired by the cuckoo song<sup>46</sup>, a sorrowful feeling kept in the heart of every man that wants to set on sail, echoes the «bitre breostceare» (l. 4a) felt personally by the speaking subject at the beginning of the poem. Moreover, particularly relevant is the double use of the word *dryhten*, in ll. 41b and 43a, referring at first to an earthly lord and then to God. This choice is, as well-expressed by Greenfield, «a skilful accentuation of two different kinds of lord-thane relationship, the social and the religious»<sup>47</sup>, and it introduces explicitly for the first time the main opposition of the poem, further developed in the final section of the text.

The poem then reaches a climactic moment in ll. 58-64a. The lyric persona depicts his mind or heart as literally departing from him and wandering out over the sea.

Forþon nu min hyge hweorfeð ofer hreþerlocan,  
 min modsefa mid mereflode  
 ofer hwæles eþel hweorfeð wide,  
 eorþan sceatas, cymeð eft to me  
 gifre ond grædig, gielleð anfloga,  
 hweteð on hwælweg hreþer unwearnum  
 ofer holma gelagu. (*Sfr.*, ll.58-64)

<sup>45</sup> *Brēost-hord*, defined by *DOE* as 'treasure of the breast' thus denoting the 'heart' or the 'mind', represents here a vessel for painful emotions plaguing the seafarer before departing. These lines – ll. 55b-56 – do not simply echo the previous expression with the use of the adjective *biter*, it can be also noted here another instance of metric enjambement: *beodeð / bitter in breosthord / beorn*.

<sup>46</sup> The cuckoo's song was a conventional element in portrayals of spring. The sad character of the cuckoo's voice seems to have been a given trait in Old English poetry. It appears in *The Husband's Message* (ll. 23-24) once again in relation with a potential travel across the sea, albeit this time the journey seems to have a happy outcome, because the woman to whom the poem is addressed will be reunited with her exiled husband. See Orton, *The Form and Structure...* cit., p. 364.

<sup>47</sup> Greenfield, *Attitudes and Values...* cit., pp. 19-20.

[Therefore, now my thoughts wander out the enclosure of the breast, my mind wanders far away, with tides, over the whale's home, around the corners of the earth, comes back to me, eager and greedy; the lone-flyer yells, urges the heart without hindrance on the whale's paths, across the surface of the water.]

So strong is the desire to depart that the emotional power of the narrator's thoughts, *hyge* (l. 58a), presses the inside of the mind, *modsefa* (l. 59a) to follow the flow of the sea. Thoughts, it is said in the text, erupt out of the *hreþerlocan* (l. 58b), kenning defining the confines of the chest, clearly evoking the image of the ribcage, where thoughts and feelings were supposed to originate<sup>48</sup>.

In his narrative reading of the poem, Orton<sup>49</sup> rationalizes the images here evoked as the seafarer mentally anticipating the expedition he is preparing, both reflecting and sharpening his eagerness to depart, but while this perfect rationalization helps to explain the literal level of the work, this passage could be read also as the main turning point of the poem: the wandering mind here might represent a desire to overcome the mutability and transience of the immanent world, so much so that the central theme and purpose of the composition will be finally made explicit, that is, that joy in God means so much more than fleeting earthly life<sup>50</sup>.

<sup>48</sup> *Hreþer-locan*, according to *DOE* 'breast as source of feeling, consciousness; figuratively: heart, mind', combines *hreþer* 'breast, heart' with *loc* meaning (according to *ASD*) 'that which closes or shuts, a bar, bolt, lock, an enclosed place, locker'. Kennings like *hreþer-locan* and the previous mentioned *brēost-hord* are just two examples among the many ways in which interiority can be represented in Old English poetic diction. Drawing on the metaphor, developed also in other cultures, of 'the mind as a container' (see G. Lakoff - M. Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, Chicago, The University of Chicago press, 2003 [I ed. 1980], pp. 48 and 107-114), words referring to enclosures or to closed spaces are combined with other terms indicating tangible body parts in order to define feelings, thoughts or emotions – that is to say all the intangibles entities contained in the body. See. C. Riviello, *La dinamica di una parola: l'anglosassone hord e i suoi composti*, «Segno e Testo» XIII, 2015, pp. 235-270, esp. pp. 243-244. Thus, even though, similar expressions such as *thesaurus pectoris* or *claustra pectoris* (see Cucina, *Il Seafarer...* cit., p. 355) can be found in Latin models, these compound words are evidence that Germanic cultures locate thoughts, emotions and feelings inside the chest; so that, as seen, within the Anglo-Saxon imagery, the spheres of intellect and emotion are not clearly separated and can easily intersect.

<sup>49</sup> See Orton, *The Form and Structure...* cit., p. 366.

<sup>50</sup> The depiction of the mind as able to travel far away is a fairly frequent analogy for imagination or memory. Clemons and Diekstra have noted similarities between the description



Central point of discussion is the identification of the lone flier mentioned: *ān-floga* is a compound word attested here in its single occurrence, its probable meaning can be deduced by other compounds using one or the other of its components, thus, it is usually read as, indeed, ‘lonely flier’<sup>51</sup>. Some maintain for it to be an epithet for the *geāc* mentioned earlier<sup>52</sup>, sometimes completely disregarding a metaphorical reading<sup>53</sup>; others argue to the opposite end, the lone-bird cannot be identified as the mourning cuckoo, because the *ān-floga* is recognised as being the embodied image of the wandering mind, coming back as «gifre ond grædig» ‘eager and greedy’, thus, the cuckoo would lack the ferocity here represented, the lone flier is meant to return in the shape of a bird of prey, and defies more precise identification<sup>54</sup>.

of the mind wandering over both land and water and the process of imagination as depicted by Alcuin, Lactantius and Ambrose. See P. Clemons, *Mens absentia cogitans* in *The Seafarer and The Wanderer*, in *Medieval Literature and Civilization: Studies in Memory of G. N. Garmonsway*, edited by D.A. Pearsall and R.A. Waldron, London, Bloomsbury, 1969, pp. 62-77 and F.N.M. Diekstra, *The Seafarer 58-66a: the Flight of the Exiled Soul to its Fatherland*, «Neophilologus» LV, 1971, pp. 433-46. Godden, on the other hand, observes that the image here suggested does not describe the act of imagination, but it is instead an image of volition, urging the speaker to set sail, a development of ll. 33b-38 «where the *modes lust* continually urges the seafarer to make the voyage to the land of strangers». Godden, *Anglo-Saxons on the Mind...* cit., p. 306.

<sup>51</sup> DOE defines it as ‘solitary flier, lonely flier’; Gordon (*The Seafarer...* cit., p. 41), arguing for an identification with the cuckoo, translates as ‘lone flier’; Orton follows this reading and explains that the meaning «is deducible from compounds containing one or other of its elements, but compounds containing the crucial second element are confined to *Beowulf*, where they refer exclusively to the dragon. It is unsafe, on the basis of so narrow a distribution, to argue that the element would not normally be used of birds in OE». P.R. Orton, *The Seafarer 58-64a*, «Neophilologus» LXVI, 1983, pp. 450-459, esp. p. 453. Cucina offers the slightly different interpretation of ‘unique bird, extraordinary flier’, associating it with the epithet reserved for the phoenix in the eponymous Old English poem (l. 87a), *ān-haga*, similarly understood as ‘wonderful bird’. See Cucina, *Il Seafarer...* cit., p. 94.

<sup>52</sup> The idea that the *ān-floga* might be the cuckoo was introduced by E. Sieper (in *Die altenglische Elegie*, Strassburg, Trübner, 1915, p. 277), and suggested also by Gordon (*The Seafarer...* cit., pp. 41-42). Orton (in *The Seafarer 58-64a...* cit., pp.450-459) argues at length to accommodate the cuckoo interpretation in the broader context of the poem.

<sup>53</sup> See, for instance, Gordon’s clearly stated evaluation of the piece: «Some have understood it [the *ān-floga*] to be the spirit *hyge* sweeping over the sea like a bird; but the emphasis on the cries, which could have little or no metaphorical significance would make such an image almost absurd». Gordon, *The Seafarer...* cit., pp. 41-42.

<sup>54</sup> See Pope, *Dramatic Voices...* cit., pp. 192-193 and R. North, *Heaven Ahoy! Sensory Perception in The Seafarer*, in *Sensory Perception in the Medieval West*, edited by S. Thomson

Interestingly, as remarked by Cucina<sup>55</sup>, this is also the point at which the poet abandons the deep streams, the tumultuous waves and any other realistic description of the sea. The expanse of water is now defined twice through kennings which, while belonging to the Germanic tradition, emphasise its most impressive inhabitants: the sea is *hwæles eþel* ‘the whales’ home’ and *hwælweg* ‘the whale’s way’. This sea cannot be understood through the literal plan: freed from the winter and turmoil of its storms, in its incessant but quiet movement, it offers itself as the only means for definitively overcoming this transitory existence.

Thus, beginning with l. 64b, the experience of the seafarer transcends the personal and becomes a broader meditation on the transience of human existence, focusing on the need for the soul to repent. The «dryhtnes dreamas» ‘the Lord’s joys’ are *hatran* ‘warmer’ (ll. 64b-65) – a lexical reminder for previous hot-cold dichotomy – while life on earth is «deade» ‘dead’ and «læne» ‘temporary, frail’. It doesn’t seem accidental here another occurrence of metric enjambement binding in alliteration, *lif*, *læne* and *londe*. Thus, while in a litotic expression ll. 66b-67 announce a clear stance, in contrast to earlier ‘hesitancy and trepidation’ towards the joys of world, «Ic gelyfe no þæt him eorðwelan ece stondað» ‘I don’t believe at all that earthly wealth stands eternal’, the following lines expand on the concept of transience by identifying many causes for death: disease, old age, hatred of the enemies (ll. 68-71).

The fundamental polarity for the poem’s last section is thus enhanced by an intentional play on the meanings of specific keywords, in order to stress the comparable yet differing values for the spiritual and eternal domain on one hand and for the social and immanent on the other. Therefore, *lof* in l. 73a refers to the reputation among men that already veers towards the identification of the hero with the saint, while in l. 78a is the ‘praise’ among the angels; *dreām* is both the joy shared with the angelic hosts (l. 80a) and the pleasures which cheer life but are destined to fade

and M. Bintley, Turnhout, Brepols, 2016, pp. 7-26, esp. p. 8. It might not be necessary to force any specific interpretation. Isaacs, for instance, assumes an undetermined stance, stating that the lone flier «may be both the spirit which has been soaring like a bird and also the cuckoo whose call urges him seaward. Or perhaps there is a shifting metaphor: in flight the spirit is a seabird; when it returns and urges him it is like the cuckoo». Isaacs, *Image, Metaphor...* cit., p. 278.

<sup>55</sup> See Cucina, *Il Seafarer...* cit., pp. 350-351.

(l. 86b); *dugub* refers to the angelic hosts (l. 80a), but in l. 86a alludes to the warriors which will be dispersed by the passage of time; *blæd* is the blissful state awaiting those who spent their life for good (l. 79b) and in l. 88b the glory among men, honours fated to easily disappear. The poet animates the fundamental structure purposefully playing with the multiple meanings of the chosen words, in order to reiterate the transience of earthly life in comparison with heavenly life<sup>56</sup>.

Eventually, the poet portrays the condition of man near death in evocative and realistic language:

Ne mæg him þonne se flæschoma, þonne him þæt feorg losað,  
ne swete forswelgan ne sar gefelan,  
ne hond onhreran ne mid hyge þencan (*Sfr.*, ll. 94-96)

[His fleshy abode, when life is lost, will not swallow sweetness, nor endure sorrow, nor move his hands, nor think with his mind].

The final lines of the text are characterized by a deviation in the metric scheme and by a significant incorporation of gnomic material.

Micel biþ se meotudes egsa, forþon hi seo molde oncyrræð;  
se gestapelade stiþe grundas,  
eorþan sceatas ond uprodor.  
Dol biþ se þe him his dryhten ne ondrædeþ; cymeð him se deað unþinged.  
Eadig bið se þe eaþmod leofaþ; cymeð him seo ar of heofonum,  
meotod him þæt mod gestapelað, forþon he in his meahte gelyfeð.  
(*Sfr.*, ll. 103-108)

[Great is the terror of God, so that the earth withdraws from His presence; He laid firm foundations, the regions of the world and the firmament. Fool is he who does not fear the Lord; unexpected death will come to him. Blessed is he who lives

<sup>56</sup> All these word-play were firstly noted by Greenfield, *Attitudes and Values...* cit., pp. 19-20: «It is not coincidence that the poet uses the same words he has just employed in connection with eternal values to refer to transient earthly ones. The conscious word-play underlines the ambivalence of the narrator's attitude toward the ascetic life, and incidentally enriches the texture of the poem». As a characteristic feature of the rhetorical strategy of the poem, they are at length discussed also by Foley, *Genre(s) in the Making...* cit., p. 692 and Cucina, *Il Seafarer...* cit., pp. 331-342.

humbly; favours will come to him from heaven, God will set his spirit firmly on him, because in His might he trusts.]

Lines 106-109 contrast the *dol*, the foolish person, whose reward is death, with the *ēadig*, the blessed one who has lived humbly, and whose reward is heavenly grace. A metric scan of the poem reveals that lines 103 and 106-109 are hypermetric<sup>57</sup>, a stylistic decision that slows down the text's prosodic rhythm. Such a choice might be explained as the inclination of the poet to reproduce the rhetorical principles of the sentential phrase<sup>58</sup>. Thus, for instance, l.106 starts with «Dol biþ se þe him bis...» providing the first of the three alliterative measures for the hypermetric line and reproduces a formulaic expression, so characteristic of Old English wisdom poetry, which is replicated with an alliterative variant in l. 107a «Eadig bið se þe...». A similar use of conventional means of expression could have been aimed at conveying a thorough idea of essential Christian beliefs in a codified and hence more authoritative form. Lines 104-112 provide life guidance, while lines 115-16 stress that greater powers than those of men are at work in human existence. The speaker is not praying for assistance in his specific situation, but rather affirming his faith in God's strength, a force that transcends worldly transitoriness. The gnomic element helps to balance the transition to the poem's homiletic ending words, an exhortation directed toward the entire mankind to find their true *ham* 'home'.

<sup>57</sup> The hypermetric line is a modified version of the normal line. Bredehoft argues that the mechanism underlying hypermetric lines employs a different set of foot-combination principles; he distinguishes three primary types of hypermetric versification with the main distinguishing factor being that hypermetric verses have three feet, rather than two. For an in-depth discussion see T. Bredehoft, *Early English Metre*, London, Toronto, Buffalo, University of Toronto Press, 2005, pp. 51-57. More recently, Hartmann synthetically describes the hypermetric line as being «characterised by an extra two positions per verse: a lift followed by a drop in the on-verse, or an extended drop in the off-verse (although the on-verse can have the stress pattern normally reserved for the off-verse, and, more rarely, the off-verse can also use the stress pattern of the on-verse)». M. Hartman, *The Syntax of Old English Hypermetrics*, «English Studies» XCI (5), 2010, pp. 477-491, esp. p. 477.

<sup>58</sup> In this context, normal lines 104-105 are configured as a prosodic interruption. Describing the moment of Creation, they are used as mementos of the Lord's magnificence and, thus, constitute a parenthetical element in the discussion, which must be isolated even from a metrical standpoint. See Cucina, *Il Seafarer...* cit., p. 383.

Poetry of experience, meditation on life, homiletic exhortation, the internal workings of a conflicted mind, a most intimate type of lyric poetry, *The Seafarer* is also a piece of rare artistic consistency, expertly using a range of poetic devices – not only metaphor and semantic ambiguity, but also careful use of alliteration and metrical shifts – crucial aspects which concur to enhance the expression of emotion at the core of the poem's content.

## Abstract

In the Old English poetic corpus, the lyric persona was used with relative flexibility even within the confines of the prevailing poetic traditions. In particular, *The Seafarer*, a poem conventionally ascribed to the 'elegiac' genre, is a fictional first-person account of the physical and mental tribulations of an exile sailing on a stormy sea. Containing echoes of heroic, homiletic, and eschatological themes, the seafarer's journey has been variously interpreted in an allegorical-metaphorical light. This paper aims to investigate *The Seafarer* as a lyric poem, approached through its non-narrative elements, images and rhetorical strategies defining the emotional experience of the speaker.

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