

THE SEAFARER AND THE BIRDS: A POSSIBLE IRISH PARALLEL

THE pleasure in the natural world seemingly expressed in *Seafarer* 19–20a is almost without parallel in Old English poetry. Topography and climate alike are generally seen in inhospitable or even hostile terms, whether in a very basic structural opposition with the images of human society or as a correlative to human emotions. The non-naturalistic accumulation of physically threatening and literally incompatible topographical features in *Beowulf* 1357–76, 1408–40 combines the two functions, presenting as it does an embodiment of everything that is alien to the warmth, light, companionship and security of the human world represented by the mead-hall and at the same time providing a mirror for the gloomy forebodings of Hrothgar and the Danes.¹ A distinctively Christian development of the first aspect is evident in the assertions in *Beowulf* 102–11 that the monsters inhabit the wilderness because God has exiled them there and in *Guthlac A* 205–32 that the fens in which the saint sets up his hermitage are the abode of devils.

In elegiac poetry these functions are perhaps more clearly defined: the structural opposition here emerges from a subconscious level into the light of day and now takes the form of explicit contrasts,² while the correlation of natural description with states of mind becomes an essential element in the diction of poetry of this type.³ It is thus that the sea-birds in *Wanderer* 47 become part of the poem's general imagery of desolation, and that the *secga geseldan* at 53, if indeed they are birds mistaken by the exile for his dead comrades and not the actual ghosts of those comrades, mark, by their inability to supply familiar, that is articulate human⁴ discourse in response to his greeting, the lowest point in his spiritual trajectory.⁵ The birds, whether intrinsically non-human creatures or the dehumanised shadows of dead men, are the characteristic appropriate inhabitants of the wilderness and embody its opposition to living human society; the tern (or, better, kittiwake⁶) and eagle in *Seafarer* 23–5, associated as they are with physical discomfort and spiritual deprivation, serve a similar function and fit into the same conceptual model of the world.

¹ This seems clear from the earlier description of the monsters' mere, which is presented in distinctly unthreatening terms (837–924), apparently because the destruction of Grendel leaves the Danes for the time being free from anxiety.

² See *Wanderer* 22–28, 32–36, 39–48, 85–7, 97–105; *Seafarer* 12–17, 27–33, 44–46; *Wife's Lament* 30–41, 46–51; *Wanderer* 73–80, *Ruin passim* condense this contrast into an image of the elements in the process of destroying the material remains of a vanished society.

³ See E. G. Stanley, 'Old English Poetic Diction and the Interpretation of *The Wanderer*, *The Seafarer* and *The Penitent's Prayer*', *Anglia*, 73 (1955) 413–66.

⁴ Cf. *Dream of the Rood* 3, 89 *reordberend*, to which the Homeric expression μέρορες ἄθρώποι is an interesting parallel. The description of the birds in *Immnam Matle Dúin* (in A. G. Van Hamel (ed.), *Immnama*, [Mediaeval and Modern Irish series X, Dublin 1941] 39, §19), points to the possibility that those in the *Wanderer* may be both birds and spirits of the dead.

⁵ For a convincing account of the birds in the *Seafarer*, see M. E. Goldsmith, 'The *Seafarer* and the Birds', *Review of English Studies* n.s., 5 (1954), 225–35.

⁶ So R. F. Leslie (ed.), *The Wanderer* (Manchester 1966), pp. 8–9.

Such connotations are not invariable. We find in *Beowulf* 1801–2, for instance, a reference to the raven clearly free from the associations of battle or slaughter usually attached to this bird:⁷

oþ þæt hrefn blaca heofones wynne
blíðheort bodode: ðá cóm beorht scacan

.....

where the lost subject of the sentence is clearly something like ‘daylight’ or ‘sun’.⁸ A more significant instance, however, is *Guthlac A* 742–5:

Smolt wæs se sigewong 7 sele níwe,
fæger fugla reord, folde geblówen;
géacas géar budon: Gúþlác moste,
éadig and onmód, eardes brúcan.⁹

Here the birds and the spring scene appear to have all the agreeable connotations of an idealised mediaeval landscape. In particular, the cuckoo is described as a harbinger of summer¹⁰ without the associations of sadness and transience which it has in the *Seafarer*¹¹ and, rather more ambivalently, in the *Husband’s Message*.¹² Special factors may, however, be involved here. The small birds rejoice because Guthlac has in the past fed them (733–8); this detail may be referred to the hagiographical commonplace whereby wild creatures testify to the saint’s merits by behaving as if tame. The motif of feeding the birds has its counterpart in Felix’s Latin life of Guthlac, though it is used in a rather different way and is expanded with a reference to fishes, while Felix relates in addition three altogether more fantastical incidents, of which the poet makes no use. Other Anglo-Saxon instances include the otters which warmed the feet of St Cuthbert after he had been standing in the sea to pray and the ravens which brought him gifts of lard, and the wolf which embraced St Edmund’s head and defended it against predatory beasts.¹³ There is a contextual as well as a conventional aspect to the poet’s use of the motif: the account is placed to follow Guthlac’s triumph over his diabolic assailants, so that the pleasantness of the landscape is in part allegorical, and dependent on the more traditional and negative conception of the wilderness in so far as it is an inversion of its Christian variant.

⁷ See F. Magoun, ‘The theme of the beasts of battle in Anglo-Saxon poetry, *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 56 (1955) 81–90.

⁸ F. Klaeber (ed.), *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg* (3rd edn. Boston 1950).

⁹ J. Roberts (ed.), *The Guthlac Poems of the Exeter Book* (Oxford 1979).

¹⁰ See Bosworth and Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon dictionary, Supplement s.v. gear* III 6.

¹¹ See E. Sieper, *Die altenglische Elegie* (Strassburg 1915), pp. 70ff; I. L. Gordon (ed.), *The Seafarer* (London 1960), pp. 29–30; N. Jacobs, ‘Celtic Saga and the Contexts of Old English Elegiac Poetry’, *Études Celtiques*, 26 (1989) 95–142, pp. 122–3.

¹² See R. F. Leslie (ed.), *Three Old English elegies* (Manchester 1961), p. 21.

¹³ See B. Colgrave (ed.), *Felix’s Life of St Guthlac* (Cambridge 1956), xxxvii–xl (for the feeding of the birds, xxxviii); *Anonymi Vita S. Cuthberti*, II.iii, III.v; Bede, *Vita S. Cuthberti*, x, xx, in B. Colgrave (ed.), *Two lives of St. Cuthbert* (Cambridge 1940); Abbo of Fleury, *Passio Sancti Edmundi*, xii–xiii, in M. Winterbottom (ed.), *Three Lives of English Saints* (Toronto 1972) [cf. Ælfric’s version in W. W. Skeat (ed.), *Ælfric’s Lives of Saints* (Early English Texts Society, 76 + 82, 94 + 114 [1881–1900]) vol. ii, 315–35, ll. 145–63].

Though neither of these passages is associated with the conventions of elegy, though the *Guthlac* passage may be regarded as to some extent an uncharacteristic product of the poem's religious context, and though the non-naturalistic landscapes and allegorical ornithology of the *Phoenix* represent perhaps too special a case to be relevant, they suffice to make clear that a distrust of the natural world in general and a distaste for birds in particular is not a universal feature of the Anglo-Saxon mind. There is, however, nothing in any of these instances to prepare us for *Seafarer* 19–22, where we are apparently informed not only that the speaker took something akin to pleasure in the natural world as exemplified by the cries of birds, but, in the poetic context of the conventional opposition between civilization and nature which elsewhere in Old English, and indeed in the subsequent reference to other birds at *Seafarer* 23–6, is always resolved to the detriment of the latter, that the pleasures of nature afford a fair exchange for those of civilisation:

Hwílum ylfete song
dyde ic mé tó gomene, ganetes hleoþor
ond huilpan sweg fore hleahtor wera,
mæw singende fore medodrince.¹⁴

Neither the precise literal signification of these lines nor their connotation is clear beyond doubt. *Fore* is invariably translated 'for' or 'in place of', but the alternative rendering 'in preference to' needs also to be considered. It is hard to distinguish the use of *fore* from that of *for*, and the two should probably be treated as semantically equivalent; some differentiation of sense nevertheless appears to exist on the basis of the case governed. Unfortunately, as the lines stand in the Exeter Book, *fore* governs first the accusative, then the dative. This seems unlikely to represent the original reading, and since the dative *medodrince* but not the accusative *hleahtor* is guaranteed by the metre, Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson are almost certainly right to emend the latter to *hleahtre*.¹⁵ *Hleahtor* could be defended by a quixotic advocate as a dative remodelled on the pattern of an old *s*-stem noun;¹⁶ but that is extremely unlikely, and since the MS reading can be explained as a dittography after preceding *hleoþor* it is unnecessary.

Bosworth and Toller's *Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* attests *for* with accusative in the sense 'instead of', notably (in two cases) glossing *pro* with ablative; no instance in this sense of *for* with dative nor of *fore* with either case is given. *BT Supplement* gives only the rejected *Seafarer* 21 as an instance of *fore* with accusative in this sense [s.v. **B** (1)], but provides some further instances, one of them in verse (*Genesis* 2930 = 2931) of *for* [s.v. **B** (1,2)], adding a number, all in prose, with dative [s.v. **A. III** (4,5)], together with three instances, including the one under discussion, of *fore* with dative [s.v. **A. III** (4)]. By contrast, *BT Supplement* gives a number of instances of *for* with accusative in the sense 'marking superiority, preference'; but the only verse citation here is *Dream of the Rood* 93 *for ealle men*, which is certainly mistranslated. None is given with dative, and no instance of *fore* with either case.

¹⁴ G. P. Krapp and E. van K. Dobbie (ed.), *The Exeter Book in Anglo-Saxon Poetical Records* 4 (New York 1936), pp. 143–7; Gordon, *The seafarer*.

¹⁵ In *A Guide to Old English*, (4th edn, Oxford 1986), pp. 260–66.

¹⁶ See A. Campbell, *Old English Grammar* (Oxford 1959), §635, for nouns of this type.

On this evidence, then, usage unequivocally favours ‘instead of’, though, given the rarity of even this sense in verse, the argument is not wholly conclusive, and the two interpretations in any case express the same general idea.

These readings converge even more if, accepting the conventionally adverse connotations of the birds in the immediately following passage and the view in 48–55 of the apparent beauties of spring as but a snare and delusion and an additional reason for preferring the ascetic life,¹⁷ we suspect some complexities of tone and attitude in 19–22. For it is hard to be sure whether the seafarer is really represented as taking pleasure in the call of the wild swan or, *dyde* given additional semantic weight, merely emphasizing his sufferings by claiming to make so unmelodious a sound his chief pleasure.¹⁸ Again, where the cries of the other birds are presented as substitutes for the normal pleasures of human society, one may impute to the speaker, as well as a new-found exultation in the delights of the wilderness, a stoical or an embittered resignation to his deprived state or even a kind of masochistic smugness which welcomes discomfort if only for the opportunity it affords for the striking of moral postures. Given the bewildering confluence of contradictory attitudes evinced throughout the first part of the poem, any or all of these attitudes may be involved, though the third is unlikely to be relevant to the meaning of the poem unless the monologue had originally a narrative context which would permit enough ironic distance between poet and speaker to invite a questioning of the purity of the latter’s ascetic commitment.¹⁹

For an approximate parallel to these lines, though at a somewhat later period, it may be useful to turn to Irish, where two verse passages from *Buile Shuibhne* have some interesting points in common with them:²⁰

Gan comhthocht fri mnáibh
acht madh fothlacht fian,
as cuid iodhan óg,
biolar, as é ar mían. (368–71, = 19.3)

Ní charaim an sibheanradh
do[g]niad fir is mná,
binne liom a ceilebradh
luin ’san aird ittá.

Ní charaim in stocairecht
atcluimim go moch,
binne lium a crocaireacht
bruic a mBenuibh Broc.

¹⁷ This passage may derive not from any tradition of natural description or from a deliberate inversion of one, but from the parable of the fig-tree in Matthew 24: 32–3, Luke 21: 29–31. The apocalyptic prophecies in these passages fit well with the concerns of the *Seafarer*.

¹⁸ See Goldsmith, ‘*The seafarer* and the birds’, for a discussion of the songs of the various birds involved. Not all of these can be considered as objectively unmelodious (cf. the owl’s argument in *The Owl and the Nightingale*, 309–22), but it is safe to regard the trumpeting of the wild swan as conventionally so.

¹⁹ On the inconsistencies which might favour such a reading, see Jacobs, ‘Celtic Saga’, see n. 11, p. 126; and ‘Syntactical Connection and Logical Disconnection: The Case of *The Seafarer*’, *Medium Aevum*, 58 (1989) 105–13.

²⁰ J. G. O’Keeffe (ed.), *Buile Shuibhne* Mediaeval and Modern Irish Series I (Dublin 1931), 13, 41–2.

Ní charuim an chornairecht
 atchluinim go tenn,
 binni lium ag damhghairecht
 damh dá fhiched benn. (1160–71, = 40, 50–52)

In both English and Irish poems the loss of the comforts of human society are weighed against the simpler pleasures of the natural world. Of the alternative translations of OE *fore*, 'instead of' is paralleled in the first stanza, in that a frugal meal of water-plants is the nearest thing Suibhne can expect to the pleasures of female company, while the dubious 'rather than' finds its equivalent in the unequivocal comparisons of the second group of stanzas. As with the Old English examples, the two ideas are closely associated; in the Irish text, because of their repetition, they have the look of a poetic commonplace whose meaning may depend on their contextual function rather than the exact semantics of individual words. Again the precise tone is not determinable, though the contexts of the passages render improbable an assertion of moral superiority on Suibhne's part such as is certainly detectable, whether or not part of the poet's conscious intention, in the Seafarer's monologue. Conversely, the existence in Irish of an extensive tradition of unironic celebration of the natural world gives some encouragement to take the stanzas attributed to Suibhne at their face value, particularly since they fit with the theme of renunciation of secular society in *Buile Shuibhne* as a whole and stand in contrast to other sequences in which Suibhne is made to complain of such hardships as are the common currency of the Seafarer's discourse.

Comparison of the beauties of nature with the pleasures of society, not to the detriment of the former, is a natural development of the theme of praise of the simple life and of the natural world; thus, though the *Seafarer* is probably at least two hundred years earlier than *Buile Shuibhne*,²¹ an Irish rather than an English origin for the motif is likely, given the existence in Irish of a considerable body of relevant material and its complete absence in English. It is necessary, only that the Suibhne stanzas should make use of a commonplace which had already been developed towards the end of the ninth century, and if some at least of the corpus of early Irish nature poetry may be assumed to have existed by then, that requirement raises no problems.

As it is impossible to deduce what form the motif might have taken at an early date, it is risky to speculate on the transformations it may have undergone in the English poem, though any ironization of the motif which may have taken place in Irish is unlikely to have crossed the language-boundary, and if we are to read

²¹ The usual dating for *Buile Shuibhne* is in the twelfth century, and that dating is generally applied to the verse as well as to the composition as a whole; see the comments of Gerard Murphy on the sequences printed in *Early Irish Lyrics* (Oxford 1956), pp. 225ff. Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha points out, in a private communication, that the poem in §19 cannot, on linguistic grounds, be earlier than the mid- to late eleventh century nor much later than 1200, and that a date about 1150 would be acceptable for both this and the poem in §40; both poems may, however, have existed in much the same form fifty years or more earlier. It is of course conceivable that particular stanzas whose rhymes and metre happen not to betray a Middle Irish origin are considerably earlier, but the burden of proof ought to lie with those who would propose an early date. Gordon, *The seafarer* pp. 27–3, suggests a date for the *Seafarer* somewhere between 850 and 940; its chiliastic elements seem to me to favour a later rather than an earlier date in this range.

the *Seafarer* passage in that way we presumably have to do with an independent English development. The presence of sea-birds rather than the more varied flora and fauna of the *Suibhne* stanzas may at first sight appear to be an adaptation to the marine setting of the English poem and the need to evoke a generally inhospitable environment; but the presence of these birds in a twelfth-century poem²² put in the mouth of Colum Cille demonstrates that they constituted, at least at a later date, an acceptable detail in Irish as well, and in that poem they plainly represent one of the pleasures of the monastic life:

Co n-acind a trácht réid rindglan, ní dál dubai,
 co cloisind guth na n-én n-ingnad, séol co subai . . .
 Co n-acind a helta ána ós lir lindmar,
 co n-acind na míla mara, mó cech n-ingnad. (3, 5)

The narrower definition of the delights of human society in the *Seafarer* may as well argue an expansion of detail in *Buile Shuibhne* as a reduction of it in the former to the more restricted focus on the mead-hall typical of Anglo-Saxon tradition. At least that may be said with regard to ceremonial or martial music;²³ the references to the pleasures of love may more plausibly be supposed to have been excised in deference to Anglo-Saxon sensibilities.²⁴

The process whereby this apparently Irish motif came to be incorporated in the *Seafarer* remains obscure. In view of the presence in the poem of the unmistakably Welsh motif of the 'sad cuckoo', it would be tempting to assume that it came from Ireland by way of Wales. Yet, though the use of natural description to create an elegiac mood is as typical of early Welsh as of Old English poetry, the motif itself is not recorded in any surviving Welsh elegy, and it may be doubted whether it ever existed in Welsh. The ascetic practice of *peregrinatio* evidently described in the *Seafarer* certainly has Irish affinities, and such affinities were recognised in England at least after the events recorded in the *Chronicle* for 891, if not earlier, though it is arguably unnecessary to go to Irish sources for evidence of the practice.²⁵ It is, at all events, easier to envisage the borrowing of a cultural institution or practice than of a purely poetic or rhetorical motif. If both the *Binne liom* commonplace and the *Seafarer* were very early, say as early as the eighth century, the difficulties involved in establishing a connexion would be much diminished in view of the extensive cultural relations between Ireland and Northumbria at that period; but there is no good evidence for so early a date in either case, and much for dating the *Seafarer* in the ninth or even tenth centuries. The tendency for the trails of

²² K. Meyer, 'Mitteilungen aus irischen Handschriften: Fortsetzung', *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie*, 5 (1905) 494–505, at 495–6; for the date, see G. Murphy, 'The Origin of Irish Nature Poetry', *Studies* 20 (1931), 87–102 *ad fin.*, though no evidence is given there.

²³ See *DIL*, s.vv. *cornairecht*, *stocairecht*.

²⁴ Any such referred to in Old English poetry seem to be restricted to females; see *Wif's Lament* 18–23, 33–41; *Wulf and Eadwacer* 9–15; *Cotton Gnomes* 44–6; *Exeter Gnomes* 93–9, 100–107, the last of which is a strongly derogatory reference. The passing observation in *Seafarer* 45 that the *peregrinus* has no time for such distractions is about as close as the poets come to suggesting that they could be of interest to men; cf. perhaps *Beowulf* 2065–6, if that reference is not sarcastic.

²⁵ See D. Whitelock, 'The Interpretation of *The Seafarer*', in C. Fox and B. Dickins (ed.), *The early cultures of North-West Europe: H. M. Chadwick memorial studies* (Cambridge 1950), pp. 261–72.

motifs in Old English poetry apparently derived from the Celtic languages to go cold is as well exemplified here as anywhere, and where, if anywhere, the trail may lead remains an open question.

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