Depicting the Time Gone by in the Seafarer and the Wanderer

The poems The Seafarer and The Wanderer are both elegiac in nature: each speaker delivers a reflective monologue about their journey from the past they have lost to the solitary present they face, although there are limitations to the past's disappearance, as it clearly lingers in their memories of 'days of toil'. The 'ubi sunt' formula used in both is a traditional method to voice a realisation of loss and the transitory nature of life: for example, in a rhetorical set-piece in The Wanderer it takes the form of a list.

Hwær cwom mearg? Hwær cwom mago?   Hwær cwom maþþumgyfa?

Hwær cwom symbla gesetu?   Hwær sindon seledreamas?

The poet here expresses how distant the past now really is, as the hypothetical wise man asks after treasure-givers and the place of banquets in vain, as these fundamental examples from his past life are now gone. This rhetorical despair is emphasized by the repeated use of 'Hwær', as he appears to be in denial about the permanent loss of his familiar surroundings. The oral tradition in which Old English manuscript poetry had its roots influences this structure, as the mono-syllabic word demanding answers directly from any potential audience creates a striking new 'movement' within the poem, as though allowing a performer the chance to differ his intonations to re-engage attention and lend emphasis to the following moment of realization. He follows this with another repeated structure, a triadic structure of laments introduced by the vocative 'Eala':

Eala beorht bune!   Eala byrnwiga!

Eala þeodnes þrym!

The shift from 'Hwær' to 'Eala', rhetorical question to exclamation of lament, conveys the loss of the familiar without describing the actual process of his exile and losing those individual aspects of his life. The 'Eala' movement, however, changes its subjects; the gleaming cup, armoured warrior and prince's glory he bemoans the loss of in these lines are more traditionally celebrated in heroic tales than the quotidian joys of the hall he previously mentioned. This escalation allows for greater dramatic power in the laments, as he is bewailing the loss of his culture's ideals, as well as his personal experience. If Pasternack's suggestion that in manuscript poetry, textual techniques substituted for performance context, is accepted, this entire movement may be read as the substitute for a performer acting out loss, as the questions and laments are emotive explanations directly to the reader that communicate his pain at the loss of his past.

The Seafarer does not directly refer to a past that the speaker has lost in order to be in exile on the ocean, in the same way as The Wanderer refers to his battles and kinsmen; instead the objects or locations associated with the land (which are similar to the objects mentioned in 'The Wanderer) are represented through a hypothetical man on the shore, and the sense of the past that the speaker must have had is conveyed by the contrast of a normal, comforting life with his harsh, lonely time at sea. ‘The man who lives most happily on land’ cannot truly know how harsh the winter at sea is; along with the pathetic fallacy in ‘bihongen hrimgicelum; haegl scurum flaeg’ (‘hung round with icicles; hail flew in storms’- the intensity is conveyed particularly through ‘scur’ commonly meaning a metaphorical shower of blows as well as a literal storm) the Seafarer is ‘winem gum bidroren’, deprived of dear kinsmen. The use of ‘bidroren’ informs the reader that he once had kinsmen but has lost them, and this vivid sense of loss is also intensified by the fact that The Wanderer also uses this word in ‘dreame bidrorene’, referring to rulers lying deprived of all joys, and used in that phrase it is a common motif for Old English elegiac poetry, communicating tragic bereavement and acknowledgement of transience. The homiletic ‘ubi sunt’ formula is also represented here, through lines 80-86.

‘Dagas sind gewitene, ealle onmedlan eorþan rices; nearon nu cyningas ne caseras ne goldgiefan swylce iu wæron, þonne hi mæst mid him mærþa gefremedon ond on dryhtlicestum dome lifdon.

Gedroren is þeos duguð eal; dreamas sind gewitene.’

Although ‘ubi sunt’ was derived from Latin poetry, the lament for grander days here is expressed in terms with specific significance to an audience familiar with Germanic heroic poetry, especially the mention of ‘glorious deeds’ and ‘magnificent renown’. With this familiarity, The Seafarer makes the tale of a man alone in the harsh elements, separated from his past by literal distance and complete difference in circumstance, more relevant by reminding its audience that the familiar and grand alike fade away and become the inaccessible past.

The poet of The Wanderer also has another reference to a past he is not connected to, and which therefore is truly foreign to him: the phrase ‘eald enta geweorc’ (also present in another elegy from the Exeter Book, ‘The Ruin’) was used primarily to discuss the Roman ruins for which there was widespread Anglo-Saxon admiration, but could refer to any relic from an ancient culture. In the context of Line 87, the speaker of The Wanderer is imagining the modes of death its inhabitants met: destroyed by battle, torn apart by wolf, buried by another grieving warrior. Christine Fell argues that this implicitly Roman architecture and these universal rather than specific descriptions of death provide a contrast to the purposefully Anglo-Saxon rhetorical laments for the treasure-giver or the joys of the hall (in the already discussed ‘Hwær’ movement). The Roman past invokes thoughts on transience and mortality; the Anglo-Saxon specificity then forces the audience to apply those thoughts of the inadequate and earthly to the context of their culture. Another interpretation of the historical context is that the speaker of The Wanderer is now as distant from his own past as he is from a cultural one that he never experienced: the poem didactically advises that a man who stands in front of the ‘eald enta geweorc’ and wisely reflects upon it would recall far off a large number of slaughters (‘feor oft gemon wælsleahta worn’- the prominent placement of ‘feor’ after the caesura again highlighting his distance from his past). The vagueness around these slaughters implies that he is remembering both the battles he has actually experienced, and the battles of a long-gone civilization through communal memory; they are the same to him now, as he is so far from his own past.

Riedinger argued that Christianity in early medieval manuscript poetry complicates the theme of home, as the poets in both The Seafarer and The Wanderer treat it as an elusive object of desire due to the simultaneous longings for a secure home on earth and an eternal one beyond that. In both of these poems the comforting home of the past is left behind for their current exile, which could be seen as a path or pilgrimage to heaven; in The Seafarer specifically, Christianity’s presence appears to nullify or supplant the past. In lines 100-101 the poet describes how the gold gathered during someone’s time on earth would not help them if their soul is full of sins before God:

ne mæg bære sawle be bib synna ful gold to geoce for Godes egsan’.

The placement of ‘synna ful’ at the end of the line also juxtaposes it with ‘gold’, demonstrating through comparison the insignificance of earthly matters. The implication of God’s wrath upon facing a life that has been full of sin contradicts a complete rejection of the past, however; the previous lines have described loss through glory being brought low (‘Blæd is gehnæged’) and old age overtaking each man, stripping him of his friends of old (‘yldo him on fare’- the subject ‘yldo’ and verb ‘fare’ surrounding the object to convey the total defeat from every side). This loss of the world they knew, through old age and eventually death, would seem to make the past entirely irrelevant: the kingdom of heaven cannot be affected by what you gather materially on earth. This mention of sins being brought in front of God, on the other hand, demonstrates that while the possessions and people of your past are now relics of a foreign country, the contents of your soul remain blighted or blessed by your actions during life thereby making your past still relevant in the afterlife. Even if the practical luxuries of ‘ealle onmedlan eorban rices’ (all the pomp of the kingdoms of earth) fade away, the past and your actions matter as the speaker stresses the importance of a hypothetical man being ‘gewis werum, wisum claene’- reliable in his pledges and clean in his ways- in order to reach heaven. The man’s past actions define the kind of moral character he will present for judgement in the afterlife. This direct Christian admonition at the end provides context for the misery of exile to the elements described from the start; he is ultimately not concerned with the earthly matters those on the land enjoy, because none of that affects a path into heaven as only morality can.

The presentation of Christianity at the culmination of The Wanderer likewise affects how the speaker’s relationship to the past is presented. As Bjork argues, the poem works in an envelope pattern, developing the scale from personal experience to universal truths as its central speaker progresses from ‘anhaga’ or ‘eardstapa’ to ‘snottor on mode’ by sitting apart in secret meditation (‘sundor aet rune’) and accepting both the transience of earthly matters and the reality of his own fate. In this way, the Wanderer turns his hopeless, directionless exile of the Germanic tradition into a heaven-bound journey of Christian exile and derives hope from being separated from his past. This interpretation of the poem charting his acceptance of his past’s unattainability explains the journey from specific despair (the initial description of ‘eardstapa’ as ‘earfeþa *gemyndig*, wraþra *wælsleahta*, *winemæga hryre*’ a triadic structure of absolute misery that intensifies in specificity by naming his miseries, the battles which caused him grief, and then the deaths of kinsmen as the reason battles caused him grief) to assurance that ‘it will be well for him’, which could be otherwise be read as contradictory. The acceptance of his fate could also, however, be seen purely as rejection of the past society he was a part of: rather than a serene acceptance of heaven as ultimately more important after meditation, the conclusion could be a decision to dismiss any connection to his past due to the pain it is causing him during his current exile. Even if this reaction would continue the bitter, grieving tone from earlier in the poem more cohesively, Bjork’s interpretation of a reasoned meditation on transience is probably correct as the conclusion is a sincere assertion of Christian ‘are’ or ‘mercy’, and it supports the theme of using even your painful past as experience (‘a share of winters’) to inform wisdom.

The concept of the past being a ‘foreign country’ evokes the idea of extreme separation; the current lives of these poems’ speakers are different enough from their past that the Wanderer sees the battles which stripped himself of his kinfolk as equivalent to those of an ancient civilization, and the Seafarer describes normal life on land as ‘dead’ and ‘transitory’ as he has found greater meaning in the idea of heaven. The actual absence of the past can be questioned in The Seafarer, however, as its focus on Christianity leads to acknowledgement of morality influencing judgement in the afterlife: your past actions remain even if the earthly results of them do not. In The Wanderer, also, the wisdom gained by the eponymous ‘eardstepa’ allows him to meditate and see the Christian hope inherent to his exile; his struggles constitute experience and therefore insight. In both cases, the spiritual ramifications of their past are not transient, even if the material ones are.

Works Cited

‘The Wanderer’ and ‘The Seafarer’, in ‘Old and Middle English: An Anthology’, ed. Elaine Treharne (2000), Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 42-53.

Carol Braun Pasternack, ‘Anonymous polyphony and The Wanderer’s textuality’, Anglo-Saxon England 20 (1991), 99-122.

Ida L. Gordan, ‘The Seafarer’, Oxford: Alden Press, (1979) 26.

Christine Fell, ‘Perceptions of transience’, in ‘The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature’, eds. Malcolm Godden and Michael Lapidge (1991), 172-189.

Anita R. Reidinger, “Home’ in ‘Old English Poetry’, NM96 (1995): 51-59.

Robert E. Bjork, ‘“Sundor aet rune”: the voluntary exile of the Wanderer’, Neophilologus 73 (1989), 119-129.