The conclusion of the wanderer: an exploration of fluidity and rigidity

The Wanderer is a poem that laments both the temporality of human life and the material world, posing existential questions that only appear to be answered in the comparatively short conclusion though appeal to the Christian God. In part because of this structural oddity, critical attention towards The Wanderer has shifted dramatically in the past century. While early 20th century critics took the position that the conclusion of the poem, due to its didacticism, was added later to Christianize a piece abundant with pagan associations, later critics argued that it formed part of a consistent and coherent argument towards belief in God. With reference to The Seafarer, which has also been criticized for an apparent structural divide, this essay will take the position that through using a lexis stemming from pre-Christian thought, the poet does form a consistent argument for belief in God. But crucially this argument itself is one that, while upon first reading may seem constrained, actually advocates for a liberation from cultural norms, and towards a fluidity stemming from a belief in pyschological and spiritual freedom. In fact, it is the dichotomy between the rigid and the fluid which best exemplifies the Saxon struggle to carve out an independent, Christian identity through use of pre-Christian resources. One dichotomy The Wanderer exhibits, which has divided critics, is the explicit reference to Christianity in the beginning and ending, juxtaposed with the lack of an active Christian element in the main body of the poem. Indeed, biblical language pervades the opening and closing lines, for example “ metudes miltse” (2) in line 2 and “ Fæder on heofonum” (115) in line 115. Furthermore, the message drawn from the conclusion suggests that meaning and security dwells from within devout belief in God: “ Þær us eal seo fæstnung stondeð” (115). In contrast to this didacticism, the rest of the

poem appears to be absent of explicit Christian features, rather it is filled with Old Germanic imagery originating historically from pre-Christian traditions[i], with the narrative following the lamentations of a lord-less “ eardstapa” (6) as he dwells upon the transitory nature of worldly objects. Deep sadness is evoked at the loss of the “ meoduhealle” (27), described by some critics as the narrator’s “ spiritual centre”[ii] – ironic for a poem that goes on to end with such a spiritual, Christian sentiment. According to some critics, the tradition that the poem conforms to is rooted in a pagan form and lexicon as it resembles that of a “ celtic elegy[iii]”, arguably cementing a structural and thematic divide between the middle section which stems from pagan and Old Germanic tradition, and the didactic, Christian conclusion. Even removing the idea that the poem has any direct pagan associations, the tone for the majority of the piece is generally secular, such as references to the Beasts of Battle (“ sumne se hara wulf”) (82), reflective of heroic poems such as the Battle of Maldon: while this in itself does stand in opposition to the Christian conclusion, the lack of prescription that accompanies this secularity makes the supposedly closed ending appear more confined. For these reasons, early critics took the position that the majority of the poem exhibits a sense of fluidity, posing the reader with existential questions, such as “ eal Þis eorÞan gesteal idel weorÞeð” (110). Until the very end there is a distinct absence of divine explanations; the lamentations revolve purely around the transience of these temporal goods. It is this divide that could give credence to the view that the conclusion is more rigid than the main body of the text, as the final lines appears to be devoted to a prescriptive religious imperative. It was this apparent structural opposition that led some early 20th century critics to argue that the

introduction and conclusion were actually later additions to the poem, employed as a tool to Christianize an otherwise Old Germanic, and arguably pagan, influenced work. While it now generally acknowledged that these critics were incorrect in their theorizing[iv], perhaps the fact that these readings were generated is reflective of at least some kind of inconsistency in the poem's structure and its relation to fluidity.

Likewise, previous critics have also been tempted to divide The Seafarer, another text which appears to draw upon both a pre-Christian and Christian tradition, into two sections based upon an abrupt shift in lexis and imagery. Over half of the poem is dedicated to the speaker's anxiety brought about by the loss of kinsmen: " Ne ænig hleomæga" (27), told alongside his journey as a solitary traveler as the poem begins " Mæg Ic be me sylfum soðgied wrecan" (1). Like The Wanderer, these images stem distinctly from an Old Germanic culture and belief system. This is contrasted with the latter portion of the poem, in particular from lines 106 onwards, which perhaps display an even more didactic conclusion than that of The Wanderer; the poet stresses the importance of " eadignesse" (120) which can be achieved through " lufan Dryhtnes" (121). The suggestion being within both poems, but more explicit within The Seafarer, that eternal joy lies within belief in God in contrast to the temporal nature of earthly things. Crucially, these conclusions at least upon initial reading, exist in stark contrast to the majority of the poems – particularly The Wanderer – which seems to revel in a mostly secular – and at times pagan – aesthetic, and the apparent didacticism can be viewed as restrictive in comparison to the heroic stories and tales recounted in earlier on in both; in line 111 of The Seafarer the poet arguably

calls for the containment and compartmentalization of human thought: “ scyle monna gehwylc, mid gemete healdan” (111).

Nevertheless, we can object to the claim that the conclusion of the Wanderer is more closed than the rest of the poem both on the grounds that it is not devoid of a pre-Christian influenced lexis, and that it naturally follows, akin to a philosophical argument, from the body of the narrative itself. In both The Seafarer and The Wanderer the conclusions make reference to the pagan-originated concept of “ wryd” – a personified form of fate that pervades Old Germanic belief systems – showing how even in the most didactic sections of their works, the poets conform to a lexis that has its grounds in pre-Christian thinking. While following this argument suggests that the middle and end of the poem are not as distinct from one another as it would at first appear, perhaps one should not risk defining fluidity and rigidity purely in terms of paganism and Christianity, as this logic lends itself to historical anachronism. Critics, beginning in around 1940, began to challenge the “ interpolation theory” put forward in earlier readings by arguing not that the conclusion adopts pre-Christian rhetoric, but that the poem in fact displays “ no necessarily pagan elements”[v]. To these critics the language typically seen as pagan, such as “ wryd”, is not used within the poems in its original pre-Christian sense: in this instance wryd is used simply as a concept for fate. For this reason, critic J Timmer argues that to enforce a judgement on the conclusion of the poem based upon a supposed divide between a Christian conclusion and pre-Christian body is not substantiated with linguistic evidence[vi]. While Timmer’s argument is valuable in shifting the discussion of the conclusion away from a perceived dichotomy, perhaps in their desire

to react against the anachronism of the interpolation theory, critics such as Timmer understate the importance of the pre-Christian lexicon. While words such as “ wryd” may have lost some of their pagan connotations, it can be argued that what they illustrate is an attempt to formulate a Christian message through the fusion of a lexis that originated in, and is steeped in, pre-Christian society. Even if the language is “ pagan only in its associations”[vii] these associations are still relevant to the discussion of how a religious conclusion can be reached through a vocabulary that is predisposed to pagan values. As critic Lawrence Beaston suggests, “ while he [the speaker] has experienced his consolation of the Christian God, his hardships have not been so diminished by this consolation that he no longer need lament the loss of his former life”[viii]. To extend Beaston’s point, not only does the narrator fail to relinquish his former culture, he must necessarily – at a linguistic level – conform to it due to the nature of the language at his disposal.

While it is easy to assume that the fusion of a Christian and pre-Christian lexis resembles an attempt to fuse a rigid and fluid belief system, it could be argued that the language of the poems suggest that the narrative voices actually reject confinement through adoption of a Christian lexicon. To assume that because the poem ends with a religious message that the fluidity of the rest of the poem is undermined, is to come at the text with a misconstrued prejudice. The narrators of The Wanderer and The Seafarer arguably find a form of narrative freedom in their search for god, as at the beginning of the former, the narrator claims:

“ Þæt biÞ in eorle, indryhten Þeaw Þæt he his ferðlocan, fæste binde healde his hordcofan, hycge swa he wille” (12-14)

The implication of this passage is that – emphasised through use of the imperative – warrior-culture (“ eorle”) fosters a sense of mental entrapment. When the speaker distances himself from this culture, though at first struck by an apparent meaningless, he is also free from this form of containment shown through a “ binde” of the spiritual and physical. Indeed, the use of past tense in the segment suggests that the “ ferðlocan” and “ hordcofan” of the narrator may no longer be under such restriction. This sentiment is confirmed in the conclusion: “ wel bið Þam Þe him are seced / beorn of his breostum acyÞan” (114); through lamenting upon the transitory nature of material things and placing faith within the eternal, divine nature of God the narrator has unbound his breast and achieved liberation of thought. While the narrator of The Seafarer proposes that every man should act with restraint in line 111, this restraint is not in reference to containment of human thought (as previously stated), but rather towards behaving with moderation in one’s behaviour to others. Rather than censorship, here the Seafarer advocates a love thy neighbor type morality, as he directs his restraint to both “ leofne” and “ laÞne” (112). The narrative voice itself – represented by the “ hyge” (58) – also achieves liberation from previous constraint: “ ForÞon nu min hyge hweorfeð, ofer hreÞerlocan” (58). Like in The Wanderer, through dwelling upon the transitory nature of the world, and extending his soul towards God, the narrator achieves divine reconciliation and an unbound voice. While both poems may differ in the tone of their conclusions, both show that a religious conclusion does not necessarily

undermine the poem’s fluidity – from this perspective both speakers are less constrained after they devote themselves to their religion.

We can also see the progression towards Christian salvation reflected in the overarching metaphors of both The Wanderer and The Seafarer, which equate spiritual and physical journeys. In the former poem the narrator “ geond lagulade, longe sceolde” (3), and in the latter poem he “ gecunnad in ceole, cearselda fela” (5). These literal journeys of the lord-less men and the spiritual journey towards God in the conclusion can be seen as a narrative reflection of the progression of an argument itself. Many of the critics who denied any pagan element within The Wanderer instead proposed that the poem acts as a coherent argument in favor of Christianity. For example, critic R. Lumiansky breaks down each section of the poem as if it were a set of propositions leading from the introduction: “(1) statement by the ‘ eardstapa’: In spite of the hardships allotted him, many an exile looks forward to God’s mercy” to the final assertion “(7) The ‘ eardstapa’s’ conclusion: Keep faith and trust in God”[ix]. Moreover, The Wanderer employs the rhetorical device of an internal monologue shown through an appeal to the wisdom of a “ snotter on mode” (111). This device can almost be compared to that of a philosophical dialogue, and critics have been keen to suggest the potential influence of medieval philosopher Boethius who deploys dialogue as a rhetorical device in his use of Lady Philosophy. Yet if we are to accept that the structure of the poem is conjunct, with an argument comparable to that of a philosopher, then the question of whether the piece is constrained or open-ended itself enters a state of flux. As stated previously, due to the very lexis of the poem the narrator conforms in part to

his Old Germanic cultural identity, yet paradoxically he wishes to escape the entrapments of his culture due to its supposed preoccupation with transient objects. The reader is left to decide whether the elegies end in a way that is fraught with internal conflict and fluidity, or whether they display conclusions resembling that of a coherent and cogent argument.

Ultimately then, perhaps an appeal to Boethius can shed some clarity on the paradox. In his famous work The Consolation of Philosophy, he claims that " human souls must needs be comparatively free while they abide in the contemplation of the Divine mind, less free when they pass into bodily form, and still less, again, when they are enwrapped in earthly members."[x] To Boethius, the human soul can only be truly free when wrapped up within the divine, a sentiment expressed within the conclusion of both poems. There is an implicit battle between fate and free will within the narratives, illustrated by the repeated use of " wyrd", which is reflective of a battle between rigidity (fate) and fluidity (free will). Thus, while the conclusion of the poem completes a cogent argument akin to that of Boethius, the content of the argument itself expresses a desire for freedom shown through attempts to represent a Christian way of thinking via the residue use of a pre-Christian lexicon. Thus it is an oversimplification to assert that the conclusion undermines the fluidity of the rest of the poem, as the conflicting elements of the rigid and fluid permeate almost every line from beginning to end. Indeed, the final lines are a culmination of this ongoing linguistic and structural battle. While it initially gives the impression of didacticism, it can also be seen as an attempt to achieve freedom of thought and transcendence by appealing to God, while also highlighting how the poet

faces the insurmountable barrier of a lexis and culture that itself is steeped in the worldly and transient.

Works Cited:

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