EORÐSCRÆF, *EGLOND* AND *ISCEALDNE SÆ*: LANDSCAPE, LITERALISM AND METAPHOR IN SOME OLD ENGLISH ELEGIES

Abstract: This article explores the depictions of landscape in the Old English elegies *The Wife's Lament*, *Wulf and Eadwacer*, *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*. For many years scholars have debated how to interpret these depictions and have been deeply divided over whether landscape is to be understood literally or metaphorically in Old English poetry. This article reassesses these poems to argue for a more complex interaction between the literal and figurative aspects of landscape setting than has thus far been appreciated. **Keywords:** landscape, Old English poetry, *The Wife's Lament*, *Wulf and Eadwacer*, *The Wanderer*, *The Seafarer*, isolation.

Resumen: Este artículo explora las descripciones paisajísticas en las elegías anglosajonas *The Wife's Lament*, *Wulf and Eadwacer*, *The Wanderer* y *The Seafarer*. Durante muchos años los estudiosos han debatido cómo interpretar estas descripciones y se han dividido acerca de si en la poesía anglosajona el paisaje debe entenderse literal o metafóricamente. Este artículo reconsidera estos poemas y defiende una interacción más compleja entre los aspectos literales y figurativos de escenario paisajístico de lo que se ha hecho hasta ahora. **Palabras clave:** paisaje, poesía anglosajona, *The Wife's Lament*, *Wulf and Eadwacer*, *The Wanderer*, *The Seafarer*, aislamiento.

1 Introduction – Literal and Metaphorical Landscapes

Landscape settings in Old English poetry have been a subject of heated debate throughout the twentieth century, and indeed continue to be so into the twenty-first. This is particularly the case for the so-called "elegies" of the Exeter Book which feature a lone speaker situated in a typically harsh and unpleasant physical environment.[1] Links between the speakers' interior emotions and the exterior landscape have been seen by many as evidence that the physical setting should be interpreted figuratively.[2]

[1] "Elegy" is a much debated term and it is deeply uncertain whether one may legitimately say there is a *genre* of elegy in Old English. See further Greenfield 1966, Klinck 1992, Mora 1995, Orchard 2010 and Battles 2014.

[2] For example, Anderson 1937-1938 on *The Seafarer*. See also Higley 1993: 40, n. 27 for more on allegorical interpretations.

Despite an argument made by Eric Stanley in 1955 that polarised views on literal and allegorical interpretations demonstrated a misconception of Anglo-Saxon thought on the literal and figural, these views are still predominantly entrenched within scholarship.[3] In discussing *The Wife's Lament* (*WL*), Michael Lapidge describes the setting as a "mental landscape, not a physical one," thereby dismissing entirely the possibility of any literal associations (1997: 34). Likewise, Emily Jensen (1990: 450) also sees an unbridgeable distance between the literal and the metaphorical in her analysis of the "earth-cave" in *WL*, stating that interpretation

> depends entirely on whether one reads *eorðscræf* as a literal sign, a word or a thing that calls up its linguistic or historical associations with words or things in other texts, poetic and non-poetic; or one reads *eorðscræf* as a metaphoric sign, a poetic image that calls up its own immediate metaphoric context and, perhaps, other similar metaphoric contexts.

In contrast, scholars such as Karl P. Wentersdorf (1981) and William C. Johnson (1983) use historical and archaeological evidence to try and explain the ambiguity of certain physical settings in poetry, an approach which has provided some invaluable insights, yet it may be argued that sometimes such focus on the literal nature of a particular aspect can eclipse the meaning of the poem as a whole. This reduction of the debate to two opposing camps may seem simplistic, yet it is rare to come across an argument that combines the two. Stanley's 1955 article has been seen by many as the definitive questioning of the debate (Higley 1993: 38), yet his views are not unproblematic. He argues that

> [f]ew will deny that with the old poets the processes of nature may be symbols of their moods: but it is not the flower that gives the thought; with the OE. poets it is the thought that gives the flower. And the flower that is born of the mood may

[3] "They treated allegory in a manner revealing a relationship of fact to figure so close that the figure was only an aspect of the fact, and not separable from it" (Stanley 1955: 452).

> take on sufficient concreteness to appear capable of existence without and outside the mood (1955: 427).

In this interpretation the interior thought of the speaker creates the external environment, and thus the physical landscape becomes merely an externalisation of the speaker's emotions and is not a separate entity capable of influencing the speaker's internal state. Stanley makes this even more explicit in saying: "the processes of nature do not, as a rule, lead to thoughts, but rather they use the processes as symbols of moods: a concrete scene may be little more than a description of a mood" (1955: 452). Truthfully, this does not really settle the debate, as the landscape setting becomes reduced to having only symbolic function, and there is only a one-way flow of influence from the speaker's mind to the physical world. In this article I will argue that in many cases the metaphorical and spiritual dimension to the physical environment of these poems is in fact dependent on the literal descriptors and their associations; the landscape has a literal validity while at the same time possessing a deeper level of symbolic significance. I will demonstrate that in these poems the physical and metaphorical are in dialogue with one another, and that it is the complex interplay between them that contributes to the vivid depictions of landscape setting that are found in many Old English poems. I would contend that the relationship between the interior "person" and the exterior "landscape" may be more correctly viewed as a two-way process, each influencing the other. Thus the depiction of landscape is influenced by the speaker's interior thoughts and does have a symbolic function, yet it must also be recognised as being separate from this interiority, and having a function in its own right.

Nicholas Howe describes "imagining" a landscape as relating "the features of one's topography to one's psychological and spiritual lives; it means that the seemingly stable distinctions between the 'in here' of the self and the 'out there' of the landscape can sometimes be crossed or confused for expressive purposes" (2002: 91). Here Howe appears to argue for a similar kind of complex

interplay between thought and landscape that I mentioned above, yet he fails to go beyond a suggestion that the lines between internal and external may become "blurred," and does not suggest how one may influence the other. While he is certainly questioning these categorical divisions of "physical" and "mental" landscapes, implying that these boundaries are actively broken down for a purpose, the argument is not fully followed through with textual analysis. Similarly, Antonina Harbus in her analysis of *The Seafarer* is notable in her argument for a conflation of actual and metaphorical travel in the poem and a link between the mind and physical travel (2012: 44, 46). However, this argument is limited to a single poem and her analysis is focused primarily on representations of the mind rather than landscape. In this article I will use the descriptions of the physical landscape as my starting point for investigating the relationship between speaker and surroundings. I wish to expand upon the work of these scholars who recognise the problematic nature of these categorical divisions by re-evaluating four often-studied elegies from the Exeter Book, and demonstrating exactly *how* the relationship between landscape and interior emotions is articulated. *The Seafarer* (*SF*), *The Wanderer* (*Wand.*), *The Wife's Lament* (*WL*) and *Wulf and Eadwacer* (*WE*) each feature solitary speakers in a state of isolation, who in different ways relate their internal emotions to their external environment. By looking at two poems with male speakers and (perhaps the only) two with female speakers, I will be able to examine possible similarities and differences in the poems' articulation of gendered interiority.[4] The

[4] For more on the speakers' female identities see Horner 2001: 29. Clearly, it would be possible to expand my analysis to include other "elegiac" poems. Aside from the obvious word limitations, these poems contain some of the most recognised landscape imagery in Old English poetry alongside solitary speakers, thus providing the most source material for my investigation. Notable omissions include *The Husband's Message*, as there is more than one speaker, and *The Ruin,* which primarily deals with man-made structures in the landscape. I have chosen to focus on the lone speaker and predominantly "natural" physical environments.

focus here is "isolation" and not "exile" primarily because I think there is a more definite link between isolation (in the sense of separation from something) and physical location. Exile is a more debated and complex subject, being related to a certain social code and the trappings of heroic society. In many cases the two go hand in hand, yet for the purposes of this study the former will be taken as the primary focus.[5] To be isolated physically—I shall discuss issues of psychological isolation in later sections—is essentially spatial. It is initiated by the act of separation, a removal from one space to another, resulting in the occupation of a new location that is either partially or totally removed from human society. This relationship between human interiority and the physical landscape is key in understanding how landscape is used as a poetic setting, whether metaphorically, literally, or, as I will argue, a combination of the two.

In the remainder of this article I shall compare the relationship between the isolated individual and the external environment by examining certain specific landscape features of the chosen poems, including the *eorðscræf* and underground environment in *WL*, the fenland "islands" of *WE*, and the seascapes of *Wand.* and *SF*, thus providing several examples of solitary speakers within differing landscapes.

2 Below the Earth – Sub-terranean Dwellings

My discussion begins with what is possibly one of the most arresting and debated details of physical setting in all of Old English poetry, the *eorðscræf* to which the speaker of *WL* is confined. The specificity of this location has been recognised by many scholars, including Martin Green (1983: 125), who argues that

> [t]he oak tree and the earth-hall are such concrete entities in a poem that is otherwise devoid of all concrete detail, they force themselves on the reader as potential carriers of meaning.

[5] See further Bjork 2002, Gordon 1954, Greenfield 1955, Rissanen 1969.

These details are not easily ignored, particularly as the image of the *eorðscræf* and *actreo* are repeated in lines 28 and 36. The features and limits of the wife's environment are extremely detailed and defined:

> Heht mec mon wunian on wuda bearwe,
> under actreo in þam eorðscræfe.
> Eald is þes eorðsele; eal ic eom oflongad.
> Sindon dena dimme, duna uphea,
> bitre burgtunas brerum beweaxne,
> wic wynna leas. (27–32a)

> I was commanded to dwell in a grove of the wood(s), under an oak tree in the earth-cave. Old is this earth-hall; I am seized with longing. There are dark valleys, high moors, bitter fortified buildings, overgrown with brambles, a joyless dwelling place.[6]

This location is anything but vague. The speaker is situated spatially *in* a grove of the wood(s), *under* the oak tree, *in* the earth-cave. Thus we have not only the details of the physical environment but spatial markers that show her place within it.

While scholars such as Michael Lapidge interpret these details of landscape as mere reflections of the speaker's interior emotions (1997: 34), one cannot overlook the fact that the sheer concreteness of these images makes it difficult to accept that they are simply interior projections (see Green 1983: 125). Nicholas Howe has argued that in spite of the ominous atmosphere that may be conjured by the description in this poem, it "relies heavily on the precise demarcation of natural features, such as one notes in the boundary clauses of Anglo-Saxon charters" (2008: 67). His observation encourages us to look at this poem in the context of the society that produced it, and not assume it to be sketching a vague atmosphere in the vein of Romantic and later poetry (2008: 67). In order to analyse the description of this environment accurately, we

[6] All translation mine, unless indicated otherwise.

must first begin with the terminology used in the text. The term *eorðscræf* itself is probably one of the most debated in scholarship. In a general sense it can be translated as "earth-cave" or "earth-cavern" (Bosworth-Toller: s. v. *eorðscræf*). The Old English translation of Psalm 62:9 in the Paris Psalter translates *inferiora terre* as *eorðscræfu*; here the context shows it to be a place where the wicked are sent.[7] In six out of the ten other occurrences of the word in the Old English corpus it explicitly means "grave" (Johnson 1983: 71–72). Because of this, and the fact that the speaker is mysteriously bound to this location, several scholars have argued that she must be dead and speaking from the grave (Lench 1970: 15; Johnson 1983: 69). Their arguments often hinge on the "surreal landscape" and the fact that the wife appears to have no sustenance and her movement is associated with the dawn (Johnson 1983: 69; Lench 1970: 16). While the associations with death and the grave are plausible and certainly fascinating, I think to argue definitively for the speaker being dead is at risk of being over-literal, particularly because there is no real reason in such a short poem to include unnecessary details like how she feeds herself. The association with the dawn also has a parallel in *Wand.*: "Oft ic sceolde ana uhtna gehwylce / mine ceare cwiþan," "Often, alone, at every dawn I had to mourn my sorrows" (8–9). In a simple sense the dawn may simply be a time for such grief, for being alone, as it is a liminal time between sleeping and the action of the day. Bosworth-Toller translates *úht* as "the time just before daybreak," a time of "betweenness" and privacy that may also have associations with the mysterious and the world of the dead. Indeed, while it is useful to investigate the archaeological evidence for different kinds of subterranean dwellings, as Paul Battles does (1994), the associations with death and the grave are difficult to ignore. Even if the wife is not dead, it does not mean the associations of the term *eorðscræf* with the grave are irrelevant,

[7] See *eorðscræf* in Toronto Dictionary of Old English online.

as the poet and contemporary audience would be aware of all of its meanings simultaneously.

A. C. Bouman does not explicitly argue for her being dead, yet accepts that such associations are a key element to the emotion of the poem: "The *eorðscræf* may just be part of the suggestion of this dreary place. But as it is said that the wife can never calm her care of mind nor all her longing, she may well think of this grove as the place where it is her destiny to die" (Bouman 1962: 55).[8] This is a space of perpetual enclosure that she has no hope of ever leaving, and "Forþon ic æfre ne mæg / þære modceare minre gerestan" ("because of this I cannot ever rest from my sorrow," 39–40). To be perpetually enclosed in a certain space implies the same perpetual separation from any other space. In this poem the speaker's isolation is an entrapment, a confinement in a space that is separated from humanity, and particularly from her lord. Line 29 has an interesting duality to its syntax: "Eald is þes eorðsele, eal ic eom oflongad" ("Old is this earth-hall, I am entirely seized with longing"). The balancing of these two half-verses implies a connection between the two. As Michael Green states, "[t]he parataxis of this line links the age of the cave with the deep intensity of the speaker's present longing and misery" (1983: 126). Thus her current emotional state seems as perpetual as the cave. This is a prime example of how external features in the poem influence the emotional state and are important in the reflections of the speaker, rather than they themselves being a product of the speaker's emotions.

The other aspects of the speaker's environment must also be addressed, in particular the specification of *actreo*, "oak tree," which makes us question why this tree was included and not another. That the speaker is situated under this oak tree is repeated twice (28, 36), both times in the same phrase as *eorðscræf*, and I think the

[8] *Wand*. 83–84 mentions one of the ways men may die as "sumne dreorighleor / in eorðscræfe eorl gehydde" ("a sad-faced man concealed one in an earth-cave").

associations of both should be seen as part of a cumulative effect of connotation. If the *eorðscræf* has associations with the grave, the oak tree has strong connotations in Germanic pre-Christian culture. Traditionally it is the sacred tree of the Germanic peoples and the site of cultic activity (Luyster 1998: 245).[9] Alaric Hall has drawn attention to several interesting analogues for this scene in *WL*, one being the eighth-century Frank's Casket, where the inscription on one of the illustrated panels appears to refer to a woman confined to a wood, sitting either in or on "the sorrow-mound" (Hall 2002: 2; Becker). This comparison indicates the possibility that the motif of a banished woman was connected with a certain environment and that this motif may have been known in Anglo-Saxon England. Hall also draws attention to certain biblical mentions of oak trees and caves: in *Gen*. 35:8, for example, Rebecca's nurse dies and is buried "under an oak: and the name of that place was called, The oak of weeping."[10] Likewise *1 Chron*. 10:12 also describes a burial under an oak and *Ez*. 6:13 refers to pagan worship connected with oak trees. Thus it appears that in both the pagan and Christian influences in Anglo-Saxon culture there is an association between the oak tree, death and pagan activity. Combined then with the image of the *eorðscræf* as it is in *WL*, this specific detail in the environment points to an explicit creation of poetic "mood" or atmosphere external to the speaker's own emotions, though the two correspond. The place she is banished to is a place associated with death and paganism, providing her with no external consolation, no way to interpret her surroundings in spiritual terms as perhaps the male elegiac speakers can. Sarah Semple's analysis of the illustrations of hell in the Harley 603 Psalter and other contemporary manuscripts provides another interesting insight into Anglo-Saxon perceptions of burial

[9] Parallels may also be found in other pagan cultures such as the Celts and the Greeks. For example, in Lucan, *Bellum Civile* 3.426–452, Caesar felled a sacred grove near Marseilles.

[10] All biblical quotations from Douay-Rheims.

mounds and underground dwellings (2003). In these manuscripts the depictions of hell are centred on self-contained hollow mounds where a single person or small group are tormented by demons: "It comprises a living-dead existence, trapped within the earth, often within a hollow beneath a hill or mound" (Semple 2003: 240). This description is very similar to the kind of "living-dead existence" experienced by the wife in *WL*, "entombed" within the earth-cave.

Within the earth-cave the speaker has limited movement; she does walk through her dwelling but can go no further: "þonne ic on uhtan ana gonge / under actreo geond þas eorðscrafu" ("when at daybreak I walk alone under the oak tree, throughout these earth-caves," 35–36). The restriction of her movement is seen in the next two lines: "Þær ic sittan mot sumorlangne dæg, / þær ic wepan mæg mine wræcsiþas" ("There I must sit the summer-long day, there I can only weep over my exile," 37-8). She may be able to walk around for a short time but she always returns to the position of sitting. Sitting is a static, passive action connected with waiting, and many scholars have associated it with the "elegiac mood" (Hall 2002: 4). Riddle 75 appears to contrast *swiftne*, "the swift one," with *ane…idese sittan*, "a woman sitting alone," perhaps indicating an association between the female gender and sitting.[11] Hall argues that it is "likely that an Anglo-Saxon audience, presented with a woman *in eorðscræfe*, would immediately have in mind a set of associations of love, banishment, paganism and sanctuary" (Hall 2002: 4). These associations, combined with those of death and the grave, serve to imbue this setting with an atmosphere of enclosure and hopelessness. I think the fact that the physical detail of the *eorðscræf* has such strong connotations is evidence that the setting does not need to be viewed as an extension of the speaker's emotions but may equally be seen as something external that can actually influence her psychological state.

[11] See also Magennis 1986: 452, fn. 39.

Regardless of whether one interprets the *eorðscræf* as a cave-like dwelling within a raised mound, or a sunken dwelling, the key aspect of the setting is that the speaker is clearly situated underground, within the earth.[12] She is living in a space that is unusual for a human being, one that is connected with ideas about death and secrecy.

3 Land out of Water: Islands on the Earth and in the Mind

The only other poem in the Exeter Book widely considered to have a female speaker, apart from *WL*, is *Wulf and Eadwacer* (*WE*). This poem is also similar to *WL* in its often-discussed ambiguity. The intentional elusiveness of the plot allows contrasting lines of interpretation, though the most common is to read the poem as the female's response to her lover Wulf's exile.[13] In spite of this ambiguity of plot, the physical setting for the poem appears fairly definite—the speaker is on an island but not the one that holds her lover Wulf, which is surrounded by fens.[14] Thus the central feature of the poem's setting is the location of *iege* or *eglond* (4, 5), and I would argue that this setting is vital in constructing the isolation of the speaker and her separation from her lover.

The speaker in *WE* shares certain of the characteristic miseries of the wife's exile in *WL*, such as separation from a loved one and physical confinement, even though there is no indication that she has been ordered to remain in her location like the wife (*WL* 15). Stacy S. Klein has argued that "female elegiac speakers characterize exilic life as a separation from their lovers. These women do not mourn loss of place but loss of person" (2006: 124).

[12] For an overview of various interpretations, see Battles 1994: 267–268 and Harris 1977.

[13] I do not wish to enter into discussions of narrative plot here. For an overview of current interpretations, see Baker 1981.

[14] As the speaker is said to be on a separate island similar to Wulf's, the implication is that this island would be among fenland as well.

To an extent this is true, as they do not speak of their memories of the trappings of heroic life like the male speakers of *Wand.* or *SF*, yet the focus placed on the female speakers' location and environment indicates that they have a great deal to complain about regarding their current place of existence. Shari Horner argues that the female speakers are even more embedded in the physical than their male elegiac counterparts who ultimately reject the physical in favour of the spiritual. The female speakers reach no such spiritual conclusion but instead "willingly express both emotion and physical discomfort" (Horner 2001: 34). Both of these women exist in physical environments that enclose and entrap; thus their environment is in some ways responsible for the prolonging of their misery, as there is no way out of it.[15]

In *WE* a sense of enclosure and entrapment is articulated in terms of separation, of physical barriers that prevent travel and connection (Klein 2006: 121). The speaker presents her situation succinctly: "Wulf is on iege, ic on oþerre. / Fæst is þæt eglond, fenne biworpen" ("Wulf is on one island, I on another. That island is inaccessible, surrounded by fens," 4–5). The half-lines in line 4 are separated into two clauses that mirror one another: *Wulf* is balanced with *ic*, *iege* with *oþerre*, and the same preposition *on* is used to position the two characters. The balancing of these terms indicates a close identification between the two characters, yet the sharp division between the two half-lines emphasises that they are separated.

The question has often been raised as to whether these are literal islands or a metaphor for emotional distance, with most scholars agreeing with Stanley B. Greenfield that all the imagery in the poem is symbolic (Greenfield 1986: 13):

> The use of [...] the pathetic fallacy of rainy weather and weeping, the island that is "fast" and the one simply "another"—such aesthetic features, among others, give this poem its special

[15] Horner 2001 relates the enclosure of the speakers to female monasticism.

> flavour in embodying the theme of separateness and the attempt to bridge it.[16]

While I agree that the features of the two islands contribute to the theme of separation in a metaphorical way, I have difficulty in accepting the idea that the setting is simply a projection of the speaker's interior feelings. The explicit detail that one island is surrounded by fens and occupied by "wælrowe weras" ("bloodthirsty men," 6) seems to point to the actual description of Wulf's environment. It is also unlikely that she would sit weeping in line 10 if her lover was not physically separated from her between his "seldcymas" ("seldom comings," 14). Kelley M. Wickham-Crowley (2006: 87) has demonstrated that waterlogged land was a prevalent feature of England after the migration period, and argues that

> ... the prevalence of fens, water meadows and other waterlogged areas surely shaped the Anglo-Saxon imagination and response to landscape in a way that we have since noted but under-emphasized.

These areas are both an uncertain, hybrid space between the land and the sea, and physical impediments to travel. The fens around Wulf's island make it an impermeable enclosure, and as he is cut off from the speaker, so she is enclosed in a space without him. In Felix's *Vita Guthlaci*, the saint chooses a fenland location for his life as a hermit, showing the guaranteed isolation of such an environment (Wickham-Crowley 2006: 96). The location of the East Anglian fens which forms the setting for Felix's *Vita* has been shown by archaeologists to have "consisted of a shifting mosaic of fresh and brackish water, peat fen, and fen carr around drier, open, wooded 'islands'" (Ballantyne 2004: 189). Within this Fenland of East Anglia place names with *eg* derivatives are common, indicating that these wooded pieces of land raised above the marsh were considered to be islands as much as traditional sea-bound islands. The combination of the term *eglond* with the detail "fenne

[16] See also Calder 1975.

biworpen" ("surrounded by fens") in line 5 lends credence to the possibility that the setting in *WE* is a similar environment to the East Anglian fens of Guthlac. It is possible that the speaker in *WE* and her lover live in different parts of such a waterlogged area, a place of danger and enforced isolation where the difficult landscape exacerbates problems in their relationship. In some ways the fens in *WE* function in the same way as the "bitre burgtunas brerum beweaxne" ("bitter fortified buildings, overgrown with brambles") in *WL* 31. They are both obstacles to travel and enclose the subject within an impermeable landscape, although one environment is natural and the other a man-made structure being reclaimed by nature.

Not only is the speaker's movement hindered by her physical environment, but she is depicted as sitting, seemingly either unable or unwilling to move. This is paralleled by the restriction of the wife's movement in *WL* 37–38, where she must continually sit through interminable *sumorlang* days. The woman in *WE* likewise appears to be in a continual state of non-movement, and is dependent on Wulf's movements instead of her own:

> Wulfes ic mines widlastum wenum dogode[17],
> þonne hit wæs renig weder, ond ic reotugu sæt [...]
> Wulf, min Wulf, wena me þine
> seoce gedydon, þine seldcymas.
> (9–10, 13–14)

> I followed my Wulf's far wanderings in expectation, when it was rainy weather, and I sat weeping [...] Wulf, my Wulf, my hoping for you, your seldom coming has caused my illness.

Wulf's "far wanderings" are contrasted with her sitting position, his movement with her stasis. The speaker's perception of her

[17] *Dogode* is notoriously difficult to translate. It appears to be the pret. sg. of a verb *dogian* but is not found elsewhere. Its meaning is uncertain, possibly "suffered" or "followed." I translate it as "followed" here in conjunction with the "expectation" of *wenum*.

environment may be influenced by her interior feelings of isolation, and thus she may notice and emphasise aspects such as the rain and the two islands. However, observation of her surroundings may in turn also contribute to her inner emotions as they reinforce her physical separation from Wulf. Thus the relationship between the interior "person" and the exterior "landscape" may be more correctly viewed as a two-way process, each influencing the other.

The setting of the *iege* and *eglond* are intimately connected with the theme of isolation. The term *eglond* may literally be translated as "water-land," thus it is an environment centred around the dividing power of water. This landscape is not conducive to travel, and thus enforces the separation between the speaker and Wulf. The idea of water as an agent of isolation is a major theme in *Wand*. and *SF*, although these poems are not centred around a body of land within water but the endless expanse of the ocean.

4 Among the Icy Waves: Seascapes and Interior Thought

From the early part of the twentieth century, scholars have been divided over whether the sea-voyages depicted in these two poems are literal or allegorical.[18] I would argue that they demonstrate the same blend of the literal and metaphorical that has so marked the poems discussed previously in this article, and in fact are two of the most fascinating examples of the blurring between exterior and interior realities.

The opening passage of *SF* launches immediately into a description where the speaker's environment and interior feelings are mixed together:

> 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 cnossað. Calde geþrungen

[18] See further Orton 2002, Whitelock 1950, Higley 1993: 40.

wæron mine fet forste gebunden,
caldum clommum, þær þa ceare seofedun
hat ymb heortan. (4–11a)

> I have endured bitter anxiety of heart, experienced many places of sorrow in a ship, terrible rolling of the waves, where the anxious night watch often seized me at the prow of the ship when it strikes on the cliffs. Oppressed by cold were my feet, bound by frost with cold bands, where the sorrows surged hot about my heart.

The *cearselda*, "places of sorrow," the speaker visits in the ship are ambiguous, as they could be both literal places that bring sorrow, or they could be "places of sorrow" in the mind. Lines 8–11 accumulate a striking array of imagery, connected both to the speaker's physical experience and his inner emotions. The frost-bound and cold-afflicted feet are mirrored by the "hot" sorrow that afflicts his heart. The interior feeling follows the exterior in sequence, implying that they are inseparable for the speaker. He goes on to later refer to *wræccan lastum*, "the paths of exile," that follow the ice-cold sea (14-5). This phrase is also both literal and metaphorical: the sea is the path for someone banished from land, yet the idea of "exile-path" carries with it a host of associations such as loss of societal status and isolation from the heroic world. This emphasis on coldness and being bound by it is also a major feature in *Wand.*, with lines 32–33 echoing those in *SF*: "Warað hine wræclast, nales wunden gold, / ferðloca freorig, nalæs foldan blæd" ("For him is the exile-path, in no wise twisted gold, a frozen heart, in no wise the fruits of the earth"). In these lines the exile-path on which the two speakers travel is made the conceptual counterpart of "twisted gold," thus presenting it symbolically as the opposite to the heroic life where a man's lord was also his *goldwine*, "gold-friend" (*Wand*. 22). Bosworth-Toller translates the term *ferðloca* as "soul's enclosure" or "breast," and the fact that it is described as "frozen" doubly emphasises this idea of an enclosed interior world. Throughout *Wand*. the sea and the weather associated

with it are viewed as agents of physical binding and restriction: "waþema gebind" ("the binding of the waves"), "hrið hreosende hrusan bindeð" ("the rushing snowstorm binds the earth," 57, 102). Yet at the same time we have many images of the enclosure of the heart and mind:

> Forðon domgeorne dreorigne oft
> in hyra breostcofan bindað fæste.
> Swa ic modsefan minne sceolde
> (*Wand*. 17–20).

> Therefore the eager for glory often bind fast a sad heart in their breast. I must do likewise with my inner feelings.

Just as the body is bound by the cold weather on the sea, the speaker's inner feelings are bound within him and he does not dare to disclose them to anyone (9–11).[19] Thus he experiences a turbulent psychological state while he travels on the sea as an exile, and this leads to a situation where interior and exterior experiences are linked.

The speaker in *Wand*. experiences a blurring of mental and external realities, most clearly seen in lines 39–53:

> ðonne sorg ond slæp somod ætgædre
> earmne anhogan oft gebindað,
> þinceð him on mode þæt he his mondryhten
> clyppe ond cysse, ond on cneo lecge
> honda ond heafod, swa he hwilum ær
> in geardagum giefstolas breac.
> Ðonne onwæcneð eft wineleas guma—
> gesihð him biforan fealwe wegas,
> baþian brimfuglas, brædan feþra,
> hreosan hrim ond snaw hagle gemenged.

> When sorrow and sleep both together often bind the wretched solitary one, it seems to him in his mind that he embraces and

[19] It is notable that the female speakers in *WL* and *WE* make no mention of needing to bind their feelings. See Horner 2001: 32.

> kisses his lord, and on his knee lays hands and head, as before in days past he sometimes enjoyed gifts from the throne. Then he awakens again, the friendless man, sees before him the fallow waves, sea birds bathing, spreading their wings, frost and snow falling, mingled with hail.

Here he is "bound" by sorrow and sleep, things that affect both body and mind, and we have an interesting depiction of dreaming and memory. His dream-memories of a heroic past and a companionship with his lord, are interrupted by his physical reality, a reality where his only companions are sea birds that are indifferent to him. He is bound by his feelings and circumstances but the embrace of his lord is not binding but fleeting. The coldness and winter weather is a recurring theme, and has often been interpreted by scholars as a symbolic extension of the speaker's feelings. Indeed, earlier in the poem the speaker describes how he "hean þonan / wod wintercearig" ("went thence wretched with winter-sorrow," *Wand*. 23–24). This appears to be a clear instance of figurative language; the physical winter is outside him and this metaphorical winter is within him. This instance is not necessarily evidence that the winter landscape is an externalisation of inner emotions; rather, the speaker appears to identify with his exterior surroundings, again reinforcing the idea of a two-way relationship between the mind and the environment. Images of winter are common in Old English poetry as both a synecdoche for "year" and a metaphor for adversity, through which wisdom is conventionally gained (Anderson 1997: 238). The speaker in *SF* "iscealdne sæ / winter wunade" ("dwelt a winter on the ice-cold sea," 14–15). It would appear that "winter" here refers to the literal season, and the context of the surrounding lines shows that it is indeed a time of adversity, one of isolation, storms and ice that a land-dweller cannot understand (12–17). In *Wand*. the term "winter" also appears as a synecdoche for "year:" "Forþon ne mæg wearþan wis wer, ær he age / wintra dæl in woruldrice" ("Therefore, a man may not become wise before he has had his share of winters in the earthly kingdom," 64–65). Here "winter" as both a period

of time and the experience of adversity is connected to wisdom, a wisdom which is eventually found in the speaker of *Wand*. in its final lines.

It is clear in *SF* that the tale of the speaker's experience on the sea-voyage is both a physical and mental experience.[20] There are many indications that the exterior landscape and weather influence interior thought. This is particularly true of the proximity of physical description to thoughts and feelings in lines 31–38:

> Nap nihtscua, norþan sniwde,
> hrim hrusan bond, hægl feol on eorþan,
> corna caldast. Forþon cnyssað 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.

> The shades of night darkened; it snowed from the north, frost bound the earth; hail fell on the world, coldest of grains. Therefore the thoughts of my heart are troubled now, that I should test myself, the high waters, the tossing of the salt-waves; the mind's desire at all times urges the spirit to travel, so that, far from here, I may seek the land of foreign people.

The first two and a half lines of this passage consist of observations of the cold weather and environment. This is followed by *forþon*, a term found frequently in this poem, and one that implies causation (Orton 2002: 354).[21] It appears that the speaker's interaction with his physical environment stimulates the next sequence of thought. They are *heortan geþohtas*, "thoughts of the heart," demonstrating that the external experience affects the emotional centre of his being. *Cunnige* may mean "should try," "test" or "explore." The inclusion of *sylf*, literally, "myself," alongside *hean streamas* and *sealtyþa*,

[20] See Harbus 2010.

[21] For the range of interpretations of *forþon*, see Higley 1993: 41–45.

emphasises this link between the physical journey and the mental / spiritual one; he is testing or exploring both the sea and himself. Then in lines 36–38 we have the *modes lust*, the "mind's desire," as the impetus behind travel. Many scholars have taken these lines to be metaphorical, anticipating the Christian consolation of the latter part of the poem, and view this as the *soul's* journey rather than the beginning of a new physical expedition.[22] I do not entirely agree that this proposed journey is purely metaphorical, as the speaker is clearly troubled over the physical aspect of the journey in lines 33–35, yet there is recognition on the speaker's part of a metaphorical or spiritual aspect to his proposed journey. The ambiguity here is, I believe, deliberate, and representative of a growing awareness on the speaker's part of the psychological "journey" that may be stimulated by his physical travel.

A similar passage expressing the influence of external factors on interior thought is found in lines 48–55a:

> Bearwas blostmum nimað, byrig fægriað,
> wongas wlitigiað, 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.

> The groves receive blossoms, cities become fair, the fields become beautiful, the world is quickened[23]—all of these admonish the eager of mind, the heart to the journey, for him who intends to set out, far over the paths of the sea. Likewise the cuckoo exhorts in its mournful voice, summer's watchman sings, announces sorrow, bitter in the heart.

[22] See Diekstra 1971, Salmon 1960, Orton 1982.

[23] "Quickened" in the sense of "hastened" rather than "come to life."

Here the description moves to a depiction of summer and growth on land, yet its influence is the same as winter's—to encourage the speaker to undertake a new sea-voyage. The landscape features *gemoniað*, "admonish," his mind and heart; thus they exert influence over his perception and actively encourage a choice made in his psychology. The prevalence of present tense verbs in this passage emphasises that his observations and thoughts are nearly simultaneous, and that this is not part of his memory. The figure of the cuckoo is also actively involved both in heralding summer's arrival and in turning the speaker's thoughts to the sorrow in the world, something that influences his later reflections on the transitory nature of the world: "Ic gelyfe no / þæt him eorðwelan ece stondeð" ("I do not believe that this earthly wealth will continue eternally," 66–67). This detail has an echo in another poem in the Exeter Book, *The Husband's Message*, where the cuckoo singing mournfully is an impetus for the wife to begin her journey (22–25).

This interaction between the physical environment and the speaker's internal thoughts culminates in one of the most fascinating images of psychological activity in Old English literature:

> 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 wælweg hreþer unwearnum
> ofer holma gelagu. Forþon me hatran sind
> dryhtnes dreamas þonne þis deade lif,
> læne on londe. (58–66a)

> Therefore now my heart roams beyond my breast, my understanding of mind, with the sea-flood wanders widely over the whale's home, the corners of the earth, comes again to me eager and greedy; the lonely flier cries, incites the heart, irresistibly on the whale's path, over the ocean's flood. Therefore the joys of the Lord are dearer to me than this dead life, transitory on land.

If *forþon* here implies causation,[24] then the previous passage of the exhortation of the summer and the cuckoo has caused this activity of the inner being, then this activity in turn influences the speaker's movement to Christian belief. The maritime setting that we have seen so far in the poem is entwined with the activity of the mind—the mind roams *with* the sea-flood. Some scholars have understood this passage to be an allegorical depiction of the journey of the soul, yet I would have to agree with Orton (2002: 366) that it is rather a "mental anticipation of his voyage to come." Orton (*ibidem*) points to the fact that

> *hyge* and *modsefa* apply to the centres of mental or emotional activity in Old English and [...] it is tendentious to take them as referring to the immortal soul, for which the Old English is *sawol* or *gast*.

This interpretation is also more appropriate in terms of the previous passages where the speaker's environment has provoked him to contemplation. There is evidence of a spiritual development, yet it is clear from the use of *forþon*, which implies a connected series of ideas, that it is through mental contemplation that the speaker comes to appreciate the joys of God.

Similarly, the speaker in *Wand*. gains wisdom and so makes the transition from *anhaga* to *snottor on mode* through his experiences and contemplation of the physical world around him. In lines 73–77 is able to contemplate the future by observing the present world:

> Ongietan sceal gleaw hæle hu gæstlic bið
> þonne ealre þisse worulde wela weste stondeð,
> swa nu missenlice geond þisne middangeard
> winde biwaune weallas stondaþ,
> hrime bihrorene, hryðge þa ederas.

> The wise man can perceive how terrible it will be when all this world's wealth stands waste, as now in diverse places

[24] It is possible to translate it as "because." Either this translation or "therefore" imply a sequence of related events, one the cause of the next.

> throughout this middle-earth walls stand shaken by the wind,
> frost-covered, the buildings swept by snow-storms.

As the future tense in *bið* is correlated with the present in *nu*, the speaker is able to link the present with the future through looking at the physical world and the effect of the harsh side of nature on the world of men. The speaker continues to reflect on the death of warriors and the destruction of the halls so integral to heroic society, a destruction that is brought about by the physical world:

> þas stanhleoþu stormas cnyssað,
> hrið hreosende hrusan bindeð,
> wintres woma, þonne won cymeð,
> nipeð nihtscua, norþan onsendeð
> hreo hæglfare hæleþum on andan [...]
> Her bið feoh læne; her bið freond læne;
> her bið mon læne; her bið mæg læne
> (101–105, 108–109).

> Storms strike the rocky slopes, the driving storm binds the earth, the noise of winter, when the darkness comes, the shades of night grow dark, from the north in enmity sending fierce hailstorms to men [...] Here wealth is transitory; here a friend is transitory; here a man is transitory; here a kinsman is transitory.

Lines 101–105 are observations of destructive weather in the world, with the focus again on winter and storms. Jennifer Neville notes that it is the very harshness of the physical world that is key to the speaker's turning to God: "It is not sinfulness but the threat to survival in the hostile physical environment that motivates the seeking of God" (1999: 51). The speaker's observations lead to the gnomic utterances of lines 108–109, and again it is the contemplation of the physical that leads him to mental and spiritual wisdom. Nicholas Howe's reading of these lines (2008: 71) argues for the repeated term *her* as a literal referent to the sea:

> one can read them as deeply moving in their steadied confrontation with the radical emptiness of the sea. For the sea offers no sense of place to hold one long on earth; there one can see no familiar landmarks.

This reading of the seascape setting emphasises the centrality of this location in the poem; it is essential for the speaker to reach the gnomic conclusions of the latter part of the poem, as his constant movement upon the sea has forced him to recognise the transitory nature of many things in the world.

The speaker's transformation from the *anhaga* of the first line to a man of wisdom is complete in line 111: "Swa cwæð snottor on mode—gesæt him sundor æt rune" ("Thus spoke the man wise in mind—he sat apart in private counsel"). His isolation here seems voluntary, and without the feelings of torment that marked his exile earlier in the poem. This image of sitting is very different from those seen earlier in *WL* and *WE*, where the sitting position of the women implied a forced inactivity, "one of helplessness and dejection" (*WL* 37; *WE* 10; Magennis 1986: 443–444). Magennis 1986: 449 has viewed this line as an expression of the speaker's adoption of a Christian contemplative life:

> the verb "gesæt" with the accompanying phrase "æt rune" suggests the contemplative life which the speaker embraces, and it contrasts this with the active life in the world which has been vividly evoked in the first part of the poem.

The speaker's wisdom is thus associated with the kind of Christian contemplation and isolation from the world that is typically the domain of the monastery. He has rejected the world of the heroic warrior that was denied him and come to a life of Christian mental and spiritual activity. Yet it must be recognised that he would not have reached this point without the experiences of his physical journey and contemplation of the natural world.

The speaker of *SF* also comes to this kind of contemplative wisdom, as the poem concludes with a homiletic passage on the transitory nature of the world of men. This wisdom is

similarly gained from his experiences on the sea-voyage, through contemplation of the physical and symbolic aspects of his exile that leads him to the hope of a lasting home in heaven (117–122). This wisdom and its consequent consolation could not have been reached without the experiences detailed in the first part of the poem, as can be seen when the speaker constantly repeats how the men on land cannot understand these things (12–13, 27–30, 55–57). If the land-dweller cannot understand the physical experiences of the exile on the sea, then he cannot interpret them in the same way and come to the same enlightenment.

These two poems are similar in many ways, both focusing on an exile within a seascape setting who observes his physical surroundings and is able to come to the consolation of Christian hope. Yet the most striking aspect of them is the interaction between the physical landscape and the psychology of the speakers. The breakdown of the "inner" and "outer," and the conflation of the literal and metaphorical, defines these poems and marks them out as among the most complex and fascinating in the Old English corpus.

5 Conclusion

The aim of this article has been to demonstrate that in these "elegiac" poems of the Exeter Book (*WL*, *WE*, *Wand.*, *SF*) there is a complex, dynamic relationship between the theme of isolation and the physical landscape settings. These poems feature solitary speakers or protagonists, and as such they have a greater emphasis placed on interior thoughts and feelings. Within such texts, landscape is used for a purpose, "to represent the psychic life of characters and thus move their audiences inward" (Howe 2008: 64). For such isolated characters there is risk in disclosing their feelings openly (see *Wand.* 8–14), yet their engagement with their environment opens up a window into their interior mind. This is not done through abstraction and allegory but through a complex melding of the physical and metaphorical where the exterior world and the interior mind are in dialogue.

In *WL* we saw how the accumulation of associations surrounding the *eorðscræf* and *actreo* created a landscape of entrapment and oppression connected to death and paganism. This environment was not simply a projection of the wife's feelings, but her surroundings influenced her emotional state, reinforcing her feelings of enclosure and isolation. The island setting of *WE* is key in constructing the speaker's separation from Wulf. Like the wife in *WL,* her environment exerts influence over her thoughts and emotions, increasing her awareness of her isolation. Finally, the speakers in *Wand*. and *SF* endure exile upon the sea where their physical journey leads to their gaining of wisdom and Christian consolation. In these two poems there is a fascinating exploration of mental processes, which are stimulated by the speakers' observation of their physical surroundings and contemplation of their experiences journeying on the sea.

In all four of these poems the supposed division between "physical" and "mental" landscapes is broken down through a conflation of the literal and metaphorical. Previous scholars have typically been divided over the interpretation of these often-studied texts, adhering to the view that the depiction of landscape is either literal or metaphorical. In this study I have aimed to demonstrate that this is not the case. Rather, the two work together simultaneously in a way that helps to articulate the interior world of the solitary figure. These texts are psychologically complex, and the key to their interpretation lies in understanding the relationship between the characters and their landscape settings. Landscape in Old English poetry cannot be dismissed as a mere expression of "mood;" it must rather be understood as a carefully constructed setting that exerts its own influence over the mental state of the poems' speakers.

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