THE SEA IN BEOWULF, THE WANDERER AND THE SEAFARER: ON SEMANTIC FIELDS AND MEDITERRANEAN LIMITATIONS

Much has been written on the influence which the British landscape and climate have had on the country's literature. A. Burgess, in his *English Literature. A Survey for Students* (1958), dedicated a major part of the second chapter, *What is English Literature?*, to the relevance that such factors have had in defining the English character and its literary history. Snow, frost and the passing of the seasons, in which a cold, hard winter gives way to a long-awaited spring, have always been present in British literary scenes. Of course we can also not forget that "England is an island and the sea washes its literature as much as its shores" (Burgess 1958: 10). The sea, not a calm, blue one, but one that is cold, hostile and treacherous is an eternal theme of British literature. Anyone who has not experienced a cold, stormy winter's night in any coastal town in the British isles will not be capable of appreciating the hostility of the sea which dominates the life of those who are engaged in an eternal struggle with the elements while at the same time living in permanent symbiosis with them.

The first images of man living in harmony with nature go back to the very beginnings Old English literature. Nature is the central character of the first vernacular poems to be written in Britain and in all Western Europe.

My aim in this paper is to analyze the prominent role of nature, and especially of the sea in three of the most important poems of the Anglo-Saxon period - *Beowulf*, *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*. I will present the semantic field of the sea in these poems, not just as an essential literary element (it gives us some of the literature's most poetic and moving images) but also as a formal and linguistic element which is vital for the global understanding of these works.

Susana Fidalgo, *Selim* 9 (1999): 155—162

The principal features of Anglo-Saxon poetic diction are simplified through terms which describe geographic and maritime images. The importance which the Nothern Sea takes on in the literature of the Anglo-Saxons appears in their poetry before the action actually takes place within Brittish territory. The Germanic tribes brought with them their continental oral legends when they arrived in the isles in the 5th century. The most important poem of the Old English corpus, *Beowulf*[1], has no Anglo-Saxon element is its plot. There is still little agreement on the origins of the poem, but scholars tend to accept that it dates from the 7th or 8th century. However, the only known copy is found in a manuscript dating from 1000 AD. Nevertheless the events in the poem go back to a period that predates the Germanic invasion and they take place in Scandinavia and Denmark.

The poem begins with a maritime image, that of the funeral of *Scyld Scefig* (lines 43-50):

Nalæs hi hine læssan lacum teodan
? eodgestreonum pon pa dydon
? e hine æt frumsceafte forĺ onsendon
ænne ofer yĺe umborwesende.
? a gyt hie him asetton segen gyldenne
heah ofer heafod, letom holm beran,
geafon on garsecg; him wæs geomor sefa
murnende mod.

(They decked his body no less bountifully
with offerings than those first ones did
who cast him away when he was a child
and launched alone out over the waves.
And they set a gold standard up
high above his head and let him drift
to wind and tide, bewailing him

[1] The poem is considered the most important due to its length (more than 3000 lines) and because of the attention that is has received. Furthermore, it is the representative of Anglo-saxon epic genre, the antecent and forerunner of the European medieval epic. Although some scholars have criticised the excessive value attributted to the poem at the cost of others, no one doubts that *Beowulf* is the definitive Anglo-Saxon poem.

and mourning their loss.)[1]

The sea, which sees the departure of the Danish king on his final voyage, also brings the warrior Beowulf from Scandinavia to his shores so he can free the village of Heorot from the monster which is devastating it. The characters which inhabit the pages of the poem are "people of the sea": *sæliſend* y *heapoliſend* (lines 1798 & 1818) and they live in the villages which are on the shores of "the whales'path"- *ymbsittendra ofer hronrade* (line 9).

It is not a calm sea. The furious waves *(færgripe flodes*, *yſa gewin*, lines 1472 & 1516) are not only witnesses to the struggle of men against their own environment, but also they are the setting for the most important battles in the poem, the first, between two men (Beowulf and Breca) and the second between man and monster (Beowulf and Grendel's mother). The gloomy, starless night *(nipende niht*, line 547; *sweartum nihtum*, line 167) and the freezing, malignant storm *(wedera cealdost* line 546, *laſ gewidru*, line 1375) are always accompanied by the deep ocean and the choppy waters *(deop wæter*, line 508; *yſgeblond*, line 1373). Winter is also the perennial witness to the struggles. The Nothern sea and the rain give the reader powerful poetic images in which the sea releases all its beasts *(merefixa*) and the sky cries *(roderas reotaſ)*, while the waves rise up to meet it *(yſgeblond*):

? ær git eagorstream
mæton merestræta,
glidon ofer garsecg.
wintrys wylm[um].
seofon niht swuncon
earmum pehton,
mundum brugdon,
Geofon ypum weol
Git on wætere æht

(You waded in, embracing water,
taking its measure, mastering currents,
riding on the swell. The ocean swayed,
winter went wild in the waves, but you vied
for seven nights) (lines 513-517)

[1] The edition of *Beowulf* used is by Mitchell and Robinson (1998), from which we have taken off the marks of vocalic quantity. The English translation is the one by Heaney (1999). The Spanish translation is the one by Lerate.

The main characters of the other most important poems within Anglo-Saxon literature also have to face the hardships of the sea and the winter while they travel paths of exile (*wræclast, wræccan lastum*). In *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer* the adverse climate combines with the narrator's state of mind who, in the first poem is forced to travel around the world deprived of his lord. In the second one, the hero cannot help feeling himself attached to an environment which causes pain and pleasure at the same time.The exile in *The Wanderer* is forced to wander sad and move with his hands a sea of freezing water:

> ... peah pe he modcearig
> geond lagulade longe sceolde
> hreran mid hondum hrimcealde sæ (lines 1-3)

Deprived of his lord, friends and comrades, the character has only frost, snow and hail as his travel mates *(hreosan hrim and snaw hagle gemenged*, line 48).

However, *The Seafarer* is without doubt, the Anglo-Saxon poem which best shows the close love-hate relationship between man and nature or man and the sea. In this case the sailor is not the *sæliłend* of *Beowulf*. The title given by Thorpe to the most famous of the Anglo-Saxon Elegies comes from the word *sæfore* (sea-voyage) that appears in line 42. In this poem Borges (Mª Esther Vázquez, 1984: 170) discovered the horror and the fascination that the sea inspired in Wordsworth, Tennyson, Conrad y Kipling:

> (...) Luego, las elegías. En una de ellas, "El navegante", se encuentra ya un tema que será eterno en la literatura inglesa.
>
> — ¿El del mar?
>
> — Sí. Pero sobre todo el del horror y, al mismo tiempo, el de la misteriosa fascinación del mar. Tema que luego encontraremos en Wordsworth, en Swedenborg y en Kipling (...)

Apart from the controversy on the structure of the poem, critics agree to distinguish two main parts in the one hundred and twenty-four line poem. The sea complete dominates the first part, which runs through the first sixty-

four lines. In this part the sailor and his feelings are pushed into the background. The first thirty-three lines of these sixty-four describe the violence of the sea and the man's efforts to survive in the difficult environment we have described. All the first part shows a great lexical richness that characterises Old English. It also shows the different ways of word formation which, especially thanks to compounds and original metaphors, like *Kennings*, are in the service of the sea's semantic field. The different terms we find referred to the sea are as follows:

yĺa (lines 6 & 46)- "waves"
sæ (line 14) - "sea"
wæg (line 19) - "wave"
brimlade (line 29) - "sea path"
streamas (line 34) - "streams"
sealtyĺa (line 35) - "salty wave"
lagu (line 47) - "ocean"
flodwegas (line 52) - "flood ways"
mereflode (line 59) - "sea floods"
hwæles epel (line 60)- "whale soil"
hwælweg (line 64) - "whale way"

The combinations adjective + noun and noun + noun, which, in some cases, make the features of that sea more precise, are also remarkable. As we had observed in the two previous poems, the sea is often *iscealdne* (ice-cold): *iscealdne sæ* (line 14); *iscaldne wæg* (line 19). On the one hand the sea-swallow (tern) *stearn* (line 23) is also defined by the adjective *isigfepera* (ice-feathered) (line 24). On the other hand the term "waves" is always accompanied by the other noun which describes its violence: *gewealc* (tossing) (lines 6, 46) or *gealc* (line 35).

Apart from the sea, the climatic forces, which give some atmosphere to the sailor's experiences in the ship, are a semantic field in themselves. Like in some of the secenes in *Beowulf*, the winter, the night, the frost, the hail and the northern wind are principle characters. Some examples are worth.

Lines 8, 9 and 10 of *The Seafarer* are very well-known. In them the resource to *variatio* (repetition of the same concept through different but grammatically equivalent elements) and the aliteration (repetition of initial sounds,

normally consonantal) are exploited in order to show the extreme situation which climate imposes on the sailor:

> ... Calde geprungen
> wron fet mine forste gebunden
> caldum clommum

Hrim and *hægl* are vital aspects of the sailor's night:

> - bihangen hrimgicelum hægl scurum fleag (line 17)
> - hrim hrusan bond hægl feol on eorpan (line 32)

Unlike *Beowulf* and *The Wanderer*, in *El navegante*[1] the climate features combine perfectly with the narrator's own feelings. Many authors have attributed the greatness and modernity of *The Seafarer* to this symbiosis. Although the semantic field of the narrator's state of mind could be studied in much more detail, I will now look at how both states, the external and physical, and the internal and mental, come into contact. In the ship the sailor suffers days of toil and misfortune. In the text, the verbs "endure" and "suffer" have different alternatives. Three different possibilities appear in three consecutive lines. For example, *prowade*, *gebiden*, *gecunnad* (lines 7, 8 and 9). Terrible experiences are endured on the ship (*in ceole*, line 5). The narrator describes him as exhausted and distressed - *earmcearig* (*wretched*) (line 14) or *werig* (weary) (line 29). But undoubtedly that which best describes this combination between sea and feelings is the adjetival compound *merewerges* ("the worn out by the sea"), which in line 12 accompanies the noun *mod*, in clear reference to the sailor's state of mind (mood).

Although the purpose of this paper was not to delve into the stylistic peculiarities of Old English, some of the examples given here, referring to, lexical richness, composition and semantic fields, have allowed us to observe some of the possible difficulties of the translator when he must render these texts into the other language. Neither is it our purpose to look at the various options which the translator into Spanish has when having to deal with multitude of terms referring to the sea.

[1] This is the most generalised Spanish title of the poem.

It is now fitting to return to the central theme of this paper, the influence of the climate and the sea on the oldest English literature and how this forms the basis of the subsequent British literary tradition. According to A. Burgess, due to the strong bond that exists between countryside and literature as well as that between contryside and character, the corpus may not be understood and appreciated by everyone:

> Snow and frozen ponds and bare trees are common images in English literature, but it is only by a great effort of the imagination that the inhabitant of a perpetually warm land can bring himself to appreciate their significance for the English poet and his English teacher.

To what extent will a Spanish reader or anyone with a purely Meditterranean image of the sea, be able to understand the complexity of these texts? How can the translator of these texts contribute to a fuller understanding of them? These questions may lead to future studies in this area, but for the moment it is perhaps useful to take some of the Spanish translations to exemplify this idea. The idyllic image evoked by the Spanish "el océano ondulante" (Rivero, 1988), has little to do with the resounding *sealtypa gelac* (line 35). The same can be said for the roar of the Northern Sea, *hlimman sæ,* which is translated into Spanish by Lerate (1986) as "el rumor de las olas" of a moving Meditterranean sunset.

In conclusion, it has been shown that Anglo-Saxon literature reflects the presence of the perennial experiences of a people whose lives are dominated by the sea. It is from this that the elegies take their modernity, seeming to go further than the romantics and on towards symbolic realism.

Almost without realising it, one is lead to think of the works of Eugene O'Neill, whose view of the sea comes from Joseph Conrad, poet and sailor:

> You've just told me some high spots in your memories. Want to hear mine? They're all connected with the sea. Here's one. When I was on the Squarehead square rigger, bound for Buenos Aires. Full moon in the Trades. The old hooker driving fourteen knots. I lay on the bowsprit, facing astern, with the water foaming into spume under me, the masts with every sail white in the moonlight, towering high above me. I became drunk with the beauty and singing rhytm of it, and for a moment I lost myself - actually lost

> my life. I was set free! I dissolved in the sea, became white sails and flying spray, became beauty and rhythm, became moonlight and the ship and the high dim-starred sky! I belonged, without past or future, within peace and unity and a wild joy, within something greater than my own life, or the life of Man, to Life itself![1]

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[1] O'Neill, E. *Long Day's Journey into Night*, en *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, p. 1364.