Nature As a Christian and Pagan Symbol In Old English Poetry

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Abstract

Old English literature has traditionally been characterized as being pagan in its subject-matter with some Christian incursions in the texts. Not all the texts can be described in this way as the prose texts mainly recall historical events from an objective perspective. On the other hand, Old English poetry includes translation of extracts from the Old Testament and other more heroic styles such as "Beowulf."When dealing with Christian incursions the most common form is the use of annexed sentences which thank God for being the Creator, but not for forming part of their life. Nature, as an essential element in their environment and an element created by God, also plays a role in their daily and spiritual lives. I have found a gap in the interpretation of these natural elements in the studies done of the Old English period so far. For this reason the purpose of this paper is to analyze the extent of those Christian incursions in the poetry and to reveal the use of nature to this end. I shall also attempt to classify the texts according to these parameters, from which interesting conclusions are reached.

Keywords: Old English; Christianity; Paganism; Nature.

Resumen

La literatura del Inglés Antiguo se ha caracterizado tradicionalmente por ser pagana en los temas tratados y el utilizar incursiones cristianas en sus textos. Es cierto que no toda la producción puede ser definida como tal ya que la prosa la componen textos que relatan acontecimientos históricos desde un punto de vista objetivo y la poesía incluye la traducción de pasajes del Antiguo Testamento y otros más heroicos como "Beowulf". Con respecto a las incursiones cristianas, el modo de hacerlo es principalmente incluyendo oraciones de agradecimiento a Dios por ser su Creador, pero no aparece como parte de su vida cotidiana. La Naturaleza, como elemento esencial en el entorno y elemento creado por Dios, juega un importante papel en su día a día y en sus vidas espirituales y yo he encontrado un vacío en el estudio de la interpretación de estos elementos de la naturaleza en la literatura del Inglés Antiguo hasta ahora. Es por lo queel objetivo de este artículo es analizar el grado de estas incursiones cristianas en los textos poéticos y revelar el uso de los elementos de la naturaleza con este propósito. Del mismo modo, propondré una clasificación de los textos siguiendo estos parámetros, de lo cual ofrecemos unas interesantes conclusiones.

Palabras clave: Inglés Antiguo; Cristianismo; Paganismo; Naturaleza.

1. Introduction

By nature, we refer to the elements in the physical world that have not been created by human beings. That is, the term covers trees, plants, mountains and rivers, seas, and so on. Added to this, we also consider the seasons, sun, moon and climate features. In a period where citizens were pagan and illiterate, they based their beliefs on what they could understand by exemplification through common elements. The monks of the time quickly understood the need for the use of these elements to explain religious concepts symbolically. This could be done by adding comments to the well-known texts or by creating new ones taking the Bible as a source.

I have restricted this study to the Old English period as it represents the first examples we have of the British literary record, and, as a consequence, this is the most primitive source that relates to the spread of these religious concepts. Later, in the Middle English period we begin to find some influence of French and Italian literature, so literature loses, to some degree, the inner characteristics of Anglo-Saxon society itself. Added to this, religious texts are the most relevant for the reason expressed above. Monks and clerical members of the church were educated and they used that advantage over the rest of the population to spread the Christian dogmas.

The need to make them understandable for this population forced them to find examples or images which were easily comprehensible for society and that is why the use of natural elements and daily life experiences were both a requirement and a useful resource.

2. Corpus

Within the Old English period, the most relevant genre is poetry since it is richer in examples and variation. Prose is focused on the description of historical events from an objective perspective but some references to this genre will be made. Other genres like riddles will not be taken into consideration as the genre is out of our range.

The four books that keep a record of the remaining poems from the period suggest that the scribes interested in the preservation of these manuscripts were mostly religious. The Junius and the Vercelli books record only religious poems but the Vercelli book also has some secular poems and riddles. The fourth one is called "Beowulf", referring to the most remarkable poem it contains and probably the most outstanding in the period for the richness of elements, images and influences, as we shall see below. Strictly religious poems will not be taken into consideration as the Christian references are evident. Unfortunately, the record survives of only the texts that the monks were more interested in preserving and those which were the most useful to them[1] so we cannot consider them the only data and, consequently, we cannot know whether this was the most popular or widely spread production. We shall focus our attention on those pagan texts retold by the monks to reveal the elements used with this aim.

3. Background

The literary production of the period we are analyzing represents 30,000 lines, mostly poetry and religious texts. Despite the scarce number of examples the period covers more than five centuries, from the end of the Anglo-Saxon invasion (AD 550) to the beginning of the Norman Conquest (AD 1050).These five centuries can be divided up into four periods, in terms of the evolution of the literary production: the first one covers the first century, from 550 to 650. This period is full of examples of oral tradition and represents the years previous to the conversion to Christianity by Roman missionaries. This period is interesting because it comprises all those manifestations by monks and abbots in which Christian teachings began to spread through pagan means, as we shall see later. This is the period of Caedmon and his famous poems such as "Caedmon's Hymn". The second period encompasses the next century, from 650 to 750, and is the time of Bede, the poem *"Beowulf"* and the biblical narratives of the Junius manuscript. In this period we shall see how the Christian influence is present in heroic texts such as *"Beowulf",* exalting the virtues of the character in the name of God.

The examples and images are far from the explained in the Bible as the purpose is that the audience is soaked with Christianity through their pagan stories. "Beowulf" belongs to the genre of heroic poetry and is considered to be written by a Christian poet. Although the plot is thoroughly pagan the poet makes Christian interpolations with more or less explicit references to God and other features of Christianity. "The Fight at Finnsburgh" is an extract included in "Beowulf" and in "the Battle of Brunasburth" and "The Battle of Maldon", all of them anonymous, perfect loyalty and courage rather than other spiritual virtues are exalted. The third period is the following century (750-850) and is the age of Cynewulf, a mysterious character who wrote beautiful religious poems. And, lastly, the West Saxon revival period under Alfred and Aelfric (850-1050) is considered. There are other elegiac poems whose dates are impossible to determine such as "The Wanderer" and "The Seafarer", both written by the same poet but belonging to the Old English period. In addition, the excerpts from "Waldere" and "Widsith" are epic with hardly any reference to Christianity but will be taken into consideration for the similarities that exist with others of the corpus.

To conclude, the texts we shall base our study on are not explicitly religious as the references would be overtly Christian. The texts selected have some valuable examples for the intended research but on some occasions cannot be considered wholly unsacred. So, for this work, we will not take into consideration explicitly religious texts or others such as Classical and Latin poetry, riddles or Christian poetry. So, as the purpose of this paper is to reveal the use of nature by these authors the corpus will be based on early and pagan texts like*"Beowulf"* rather than the late religious texts, as they are more explicit in their descriptions.

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[1]Raw, B. 1978.*The Art and Background of Old English Poetry* London: Edward Arnold. p.3

For this reason and because they are posterior, we shall omit references to the *Book of Nature*, as the aim is to promote Christian virtues and discourage vice; the King James´ version of the Bible, for its overt purpose; the *Bestiary,* as *these manuscripts functioned primarily as handy sources of sermon anecdotes (exempla) for preachers*[2] and the *Book of Psalms,* for the same reasons as the version of the Bible. Thus, even within the books belonging to the period analyzed, we shall focus on the earliest pagan texts, as references to Christian concepts had to be made in a more subtle and visual way. The poetry of this period is characterized by the use of traditional German alliterative verse and the use of descriptive epithets, kennings, balanced antithesis and repetition as the most common resources to fulfill the desired purpose. On some occasions the difference between kenning and epithet is somewhat blurred. Some different definitions offered may coincide in some of the writers. We shall consider the kenning as a metaphorical means to describe somebody´s qualities. So, in a way, it always enhances somebody's virtues ("stout-hearted" for bravery). On the other hand, the epithet is used to characterize somebody or something, not to emphasize virtues or features ("Eternal Lord" for God). Simple as it seems, on some occasions kennings are used to describe inanimate objects in order to give a poetic image of the picture ("The Whale Road" for the sea, "Battle Sweat" for blood).

The use of these resources was not enough for an uncultivated society. Aldhelm, a contemporary of Caedmon, knew this well and also recognized the power of verse for any ear. For this reason, he hid behind a bridge close to a group of throngs and he started to sing a song. When he had attracted people's attention, he started to describe sacred events with beautiful verses. This was the most effective way to spread the Bible between the gathering (Abbey, online). The second problem these abbots had is that the stories could not be distant from the daily lives of the audience, as they would lose interest in the recital. It was necessary to make stories credible and the best way was to insert small events, characters or comparisons. This is the case of *"Beowulf"*, a Scandinavian saga with interpolations of Christian passages, probably made by Cynewulf or some contemporaries. With regard to this last characteristic, we cannot ignore the purpose of these poems. Scholars take for granted that it was to convert pagan society but pagan poems were recited in the monasteries, and secular society was as alert to religious symbolism as some modern critics are. These events were part of their daily life and, by acknowledging that they are religious poems, the interpolations in the pagan texts could be considered as more related to professional deformation rather than a strong interest in conversion[3].

Unfortunately, as these poems belong to such an early period in history, most of them are not extant. Even though we have reference to some of them in the annals of the middle Ages, they cannot be included in our corpus as they have disappeared, so scholars have to do the research based on what has been preserved, not necessarily on what was most popular then.

4. State of The Art

The purpose of the monks in their poems and writings is firstly to persuade, judge and instruct[4] and the audience to whom they speak is illiterate. The means by which they teach these people must be clear and subtle at the same time: clear when talking about God and how to get heaven; but subtle when expressing how God surrounds everything and how one's good and bad Deeds will affect one in the afterlife. The ways of expressing these purposes have been studied over the years taking different elements as the aim of study, of which nature has something to do directly or indirectly. In this chapter we shall try to offer an overall vision of the studies undertaken so far.

Several studies have been done on the role of a specific focus in the explanation of Christian concepts. So, to cite some examples, Kieckhefer[5]explained the role of magic in this period. He stated that magic and faith have been interchanged in many occasions as a tool for the christianizing of indigenous European cultures and that religion and magic have had a binary opposition through the centuries, where natural and demonic magic have been opposed. It is remarkable how the Bible is full of stories of wondrous events but when the Old Testament deals explicitly with magic, it is to condemn it[6].

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[2]McSheffrey, S. 1995. *Gender and Heresy. Women and Men in Lollard Communities, 1420-1530* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.p.37
[3]Raw, B. 1978.*The Art and Background of Old English Poetry* London: Edward Arnold. p.9
[4]Raw, B. 1978.*The Art and Background of Old English Poetry* London: Edward Arnold. p.16
[5]Kieckhefer, R. 2000. *Magic in the Middle Ages* Cambridge University Press.
[6]Kieckhefer, R. 2000. *Magic in the Middle Ages* Cambridge University Press. p.33

Hanscom[7] also admits that mist was used as a supernatural character although not clearly defined as related to good and evil. The element of magic has also been quite controversial and in opposition with religion: when a miracle happens it always has a positive goal but when related to magic, it is more related to demonic intentions; in fact, it is *religion that turned away from God and toward demons for their help in human affairs*[8]. Mead[9], on the other hand, wrote a paper on the meaning of color in Old English texts. He concludes that the examples of color in the 30,000 lines of Old English texts can be summarized in 800 and that the most frequent are included in religious texts. Interestingly, words expressing light or brightness are twice as numerous as those expressing darkness but in the remaining texts, as we shall see later, bleak and wintry atmosphere is much more frequent.

Hanscom[10], in her paper entitled "The Feeling for Nature in Old English Poetry", makes a profound revision of the different natural elements used in Old English poetry. She reaches to interesting conclusions such as, for instance, the scarce references to the different seasons except winter. This leads to the almost non-existent mention of elements like flowers, trees, fruits and so on (except in "Beowulf"). When done, it is in a lifeless and conventional manner, unlike the use of them by Renaissance poets in later centuries. Winter, on the other hand, is much more common and is also used to mean "year". For her, the sun is the only element used with Christian purposes although heat is never mentioned but some synonyms like candle. She concludes saying that Christianity introduced an entirely new set of facts and conceptions, and by the addition of this new material the field for comparison was greatly enlarged. The poet's lack of subtlety prevented them from seeing incongruities which to us are absurdly obvious; and we find pagan metaphor and Christian simile jostling each other almost in the same line (p.25)

Also, Lester[11] offers a comprehensive list of all the different kennings that the sun has in Old English Poetry: "God's candle", "heaven-light", "heaven-candle", "heaven's gem" or "the bright beacon of god". As we can see, the concept of heat does not appear. Hanscom also says that poetry in this period is objective: metaphors were used with a pedagogical purpose but more often through the use of kennings and other figures seen above. Alexander[12] adds that the poetry is obscure because of the lack of information we have and what we have, written by monks, is not much interested in pagan topics. Others have based the study on the meaning of dream-vision[13] and allegory[14] (Gardner, 1975). The former explains that dream-poetry was extended in the Middle Ages before the Judeo-Christian influence and has its roots in the classical tradition. The dream belongs to the world of the mind and for this reason, could not be part of anyone´s objective experience. The early centuries of Christianity took advantage of this to explain religious visions, which were difficult to explain and interpret in everyday life.

Related to this, Reverend Abbey (online) wrote a comprehensive essay on *Religious Thoughtin Old English Verse*. He explains how that spread of Christianity was produced since Caedmon and how he became a great orator through a dream-vision, quite close to a miracle in this case. He offers an exhaustive revision of the most popular and not so popular poems in this period explaining the Christian influence and meaning. He covers the whole period of the middle Ages and bases his study on religious texts. Gardner also states that allegory had been used before the Christian influence to defend pagan fables but Christians also made use of them *as a means of moralizing mythology or other old pagan materials for difficult purposes*.[15]

Timmer[16] wrote an interesting paper entitled "Heathen and Christian elements in Old English Poetry". He states that in *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer* it is impossible to separate the Christian from the heathen parts as they *are*

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[7]Hanscom, E. D. 1905. *The Feeling for Nature in Old English Poetry*, "The Journal of English and Germanic Philology" 5, 4: 439-463.

[8]Kieckhefer, R. 2000. *Magic in the Middle Ages* Cambridge University Presss. p. 25.

[9]Mead, W. E. 1972. *Color in Old English Poetry*in "PMLA" 14, 2: 169:206.

[10]Hanscom, E. D. 1905. *The Feeling for Nature in Old English Poetry*, "The Journal of English and Germanic Philology" 5, 4: 439-463.

[11]Lester,G. A. 1996. *The Language of Old and Middle English Poetry* London: Macmillan. p.53

[12]Alexander, M. 1983. *Old English Literature* London: Macmillan.

[13]Spearing, A.C. 1980 (1st ed. 1976). *Medieval Dream Poetry* Cambridge University Press.

[14]Gardner, J. 1975. *The Construction of Christian Poetryin Old English* Southern Illinois University Press.

[15]Gardner, J. 1975. *The Construction of Christian Poetryin Old English* Southern Illinois University Press.p.2

[16]Timmer, 1944.*Heathen and Christian elements in Old English P*oetry, "Neophilologus" 29, 1:180-185.

fairly old in their original elegiac form, but they have become entirely Christian in spirit.[17] On the other hand, he acknowledges that poems like *Andreas*, *Elene*, *Juliana*, *Genesis B* and *Judith* are *religious in their subject-matter, but their vocabulary is the traditional heroic one*.[18]Contrasts (or "disputations") have also been a subject matter for scholars (see Wallace, 1999 and Mandel, 1971) due to the frequent number of juxtapositions in the poems. So, Wallace names soul versus body, wine versus water, and summer versus winter. As we shall see below, there are others like "Beowulf" versus Grendel. Even though the aim of the publication is different, the reference to some elements in nature is unavoidable. On the other hand, Mandel considers the contrasts in *The Wanderer* between public and private, sorrow and relief, and transient and fixed to *establish tensions which [he] expands upon and intensifies later in the poem.[19]*

This is just a sample of the studies done formerly and we can see that the focus in them is very specific: elements in nature or in our daily life and how they were treated in the texts. Interesting conclusions have made such as the common use of elements as light or darkness and the preference for winter over other seasons; on the other hand, we find the rewriting of biblical texts taken more or less literally. I have found a gap in how those elements of nature were used to explain religious, spiritual concepts. This will be the topic of the following chapter.

5. Discussion

We shall divide the texts according to their topic and setting. So, Old English texts can be divided up into two main blocks: on the one hand, we have the religious texts which have been written by monks, and their purpose is to spread the Bible to society. Consequently, they constitute a paraphrasing of the religious events, mostly taken from the Old Testament, as told in the Bible. The purpose is clear: to explain the Scriptures and teach the dogmas of Christianity to that civilization.

The second block is composed of pagan texts. They are texts that reflect the common daily life of that society and the literary topics in that period: loyalty, courage, warlike events, and so on and they have no straightforward relationship with the Bible. This second group can be subdivided again into two other groups: one would consist of the texts that contain religious topics in pagan settings: for instance, "The Dream of the Rood". Here, Jesus Christ is presented as a warrior. No pain or suffering is expressed but the events have been copied from the Bible; and the other would be texts with pagan topics and pagan settings. Again, we can classify them into the ones that have some religious references although these interpolations cannot be considered topics (as in "Beowulf") and others that describe events: wars, battles, or so, as in "The Battle of Maldon". They are thoroughly pagan. What has been said so far could be expressed in the following diagram:

Religioustexts	"Judith" "Daniel" "Christ"		
Pagan texts	Pagan setting with religious topic	"The Dream of the Rood" "Caedmon'sHymn"	
	Pagan setting with pagan topic	Religious in cursions	"Beowulf" "The Wanderer" "The Seafarer"
		Description of events	"The Battle of Maldon" "The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle"

Table 1: Division of Old English texts according to the topic and setting with an example

As we can see in table 1, I have classified the texts from completely religious, such as "Judith", "Daniel" or "Christ" to completely unreligious, as "The Battle of Maldon". In the middle and within pagan texts, we find texts in which the pagan setting is just a pretext for the presentation of the religious message, such asin "Caedmon's Hymn", and others in which pagan influence is more remarkable, like "Beowulf".

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[17]Timmer, 1944. "Heathen and Christian elements in Old English poetry" in *Neophilologus*29, 1:180-185.

[18]Timmer, 1944. "Heathen and Christian elements in Old English poetry" in *Neophilologus*29, 1:180-185.

[19]Mandel, J. 1971. "Contrasts in Old English Poetry" in *The Chaucer Review* 6,1: 6.

(a) The religious influence is overt and the lack of originality in the stories is obvious. The purpose is simply to relate events from the Bible by religious scribes and churchmen. Examples are varied and most of them belong to the Old Testament. They represent the bulk of the texts we have but not necessarily the ones that have most literary value.

(b) Pagan settings with religious topics. They make use of the dream-vision to explain what the narrator has experienced. Two examples are outstanding: "The Dream of the Rood" is the description given by a tree of the Passion of Christ. The tree has become the cross where Christ was crucified so it can explain in first person the Passion and Crucifixion. As I said before, it has some pagan characteristics, insomuch as the Rood is presented as a loyal soldier to his lord. In the account of the events, he feels melancholy over the suffering and loss of his lord but at the same time reflects humility and pride. We also find a parallelism in the transformation of both characters: the tree became a cross as the warrior became a hero. These two characters became one as the story is told with sentences like *they mocked us both together*.

Another example is "Caedmon's Hymn". The setting is again pagan. This is the story of a guest that leaves a feast when the rest starts to sing. When he sees the harp passed from hand to hand, he leaves the room. But through a dream-vision, he becomes the finest singer. He is asked to explain the Creation (again the Old Testament) and the exposition is full of religious words, kennings and expressions but the frame is pagan. In this poem we find some examples of nature images to explain that something bad is about to happen: "the bitter wintry weather, fleeting clouds […] the dusky birds of battle screamed around,/ a dewy-feathered throng, thirsty for blood." In these two lines we can see not only the presence of winter as a season related to bad feelings but also the throng of birds as the omen to an imminent battle. So, in this poem we see two different and opposing scenarios: the feast as the pagan setting and, secondly, the religious song and a sort of "miracle" through the dream-vision on the Christian side. This dream-vision also appears in the previous poem "The Dream of the Rood", when the cross asks in a dream to tell men of this vision with the promise of "the King of Glory."

(c) Pagan topics and setting with religious incursions. The most remarkable example is "Beowulf", a long poem written probably by a Christian scribe although the material from which it was composed belongs to an earlier date and to a distant and pagan land[20]. This is the story of a hero with supernatural strength who has to fight against a dragon for his people's sake. The topic is pagan, the setting is Denmark and the description is realistic. The characteristics of the story are pagan: loyalty to the lord and from the lord to the soldiers; dauntless courage in defense of what is his; but, on the other hand, courtesy in hall and respect for ladies. It is heroic and the characters are full of grave dignity.

On the other hand, despite the fact that Raw considers that "Beowulf" is defined in a strictly secular way[21] I find some characteristics that remind us the Bible. For instance, there is some parallelism between Beowulf'sbirth and that of Jesus: *a comfort sent / by God in that nation. He knew what they had tholed,/the long times and troubles they'd come through/ without a leader; so the Lord of Life,/ the glorious Almighty, made this man renowned*[22]. Beowulf's aim in life is also expressed in: *after his father took leave/ of his life on earth*[23] and later, in the preparation of the battle against Grendel, it is revealed that he is a special person, with a purpose in life and extra power: Jesus could make miracles and "Beowulf" can fight against monsters. The contrast between good and evil is also reflected with the verse beginning *a banquet where scops are telling the origin of the universe when a demon attacks*[24] and the comparison next between Grendel and Cain[25]. Grendel, later, is also compared with demons: and his glee was demonic[26] (l. 730).

Grendel's mother is also compared to demons: "monstrous hell-bride[27]so the dragon has been characterized with some secular and Christian elements. According to Alexander[28],

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[20]Greison, H. & J. C. Smith. 1983. *A Critical History of English Poetry* New Jersey: Humanities Press. p.3

[21]Raw, B. 1978.*The Art and Background of Old English Poetry* London: Edward Arnold. p.82

[22]ll. 12-17.

[23]ll. 55-56

[24]l. 86

[25]ll. 106-114

[26]l. 730

[27]l. 1260

[28]Alexander, M. 1983. *Old English Literature* London: Macmillan. p.70

In Christian tradition, the devil is often conceived as a dragon, following many hints in the bible, from the serpent of Eden to the dragon of the Apocalypse. Although there are more Satanic epithets applied to Grendel than to the dragon, the dragon is Beowulf's supreme antagonist. This raises the apparent difficulty that if the dragon in any way suggests Satan, Beowulf is by the same process assimilated to the Christ whose victory over Satan in the Harrowing of Hell episode was so popular a feature of medieval Christian belief.

As has been agreed by most scholars (e.g. Abbey) this is originally a pagan text with Christian interpolations probably made by Cynewulf or some other English poet. Other examples in this group are the elegiac poems "The Wanderer" and "The Seafarer", with "Deor", "The Wife's Complaint", "The Husband's Message", "The Endowments and Pursuit of Men", "The Dialogue of Salomon and Saturn", "Exodus", "The First Worcester Fragment" and "The Ruin" as the most remarkable. In "The Wanderer" the tides represent the ever-changing steps in life. Winter and solitude are linked as reflecting the spiritual coldness people suffer when feeling alone. On the other hand, in "The Seafarer" the sea-birds have a remarkable role as their swooping flight and wild cry is like the echo of the heart of the seafarer. Gardner[29] states that "all of these poems ["The Wanderer", "The Seafarer"] make Christian allegorical use of non biblical subject matter and thus reflect a shift of poetic concern, [...] from this imitation of pagan eloquence to the borrowing of pagan material for a Christian purpose."

In "Deor", some elements of nature are named as "winter-bitter wrack" referring to sorrow and agony. "Theotric ruled for thirty winters", "Ermaniac's wolfish thought" and "darkening in his mind" are some of the examples that reflect the negative feelings of a hard life. The poem names several rulers and how well they did and expresses how proud the poet is of being the scop of all of them so far but there is no reference to Christian elements in nature. As we have seen, the references are there to describe the rulers' personalities and the atmosphere."The Endowments and Pursuits of Men" is like a choral hymn passed through a Christian mould[30] and in "The Dialogue of Salomon and Saturn" we read these lines: *The leaf is green, then falloweth again,/falleth to earth, and turneth to its dust./ E'en so shall fall they who works in on earth,/ who live in guilt, who hide their costly hoards.* In a way he is making a comparison between good deeds on earth and reward inthe afterlife. Otherwise, you will merely become dust, like leaves. So leaves when falling from a tree are like lives when they pass away. "Exodus" has a predominantly warlike tone but the heroic description of the crossing of the Red Sea is combined with the moral lesson of the need to obey the supreme Law to be successful in the difficult tasks you may face in life.

In "The First Worcester Fragment" we find an example of the presence of nature at the end of the presentation of Saint Bede that says: *Now our Lord speaks this, `as an eagle stirs up her young to fly, and hovers over them.´ This is the word of God, sent to the world that we shall fix a beautiful faith upon them* where the image of an eagle is an analogy with God.

(d) The fourth and last group is composed of texts which are thoroughly pagan. That is, there is no reference to Christianity and most of them reflect historical events. In them God is named as the ruler and the one who will decide who will win the battle but is not part of the events. The poems in this group are "The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle" and "The Battle of Maldon", for instance. "Widsith" and "Waldere" have also been included. "Widsith" describes continental courts visited in imagination by a far-wandering scop; and "Waldere", with the "The Fight at Finnsburgh" describes a battle against fearful odds. Widsith cannot be considered a religious text but God is named as the reward of the life lived here and heaven is the after-life home, as is the case with "Waldere"[31]. This is a dialogue between a man and a woman written in sixty lines. In the dialogue, the old warrior aristocracy is celebrated and God is named three times by the woman with the purpose of making her husband approach Christian ethics[32]: *I feared god for thee/ that you too rashly would seek battle/ at the worrying, with another man,/ seek warfare[33]* and *Bring honor to yourself/with virtuous deeds as long as God cares for you![34]*. The religious reference is secondary and the implication of nature is non-existent. The dialogue is between valor and war and the naming of God is as a support in the battle and as the aim of her prayer.

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[29]Gardner, J. 1975. *The Construction of Christian Poetryin Old English* Southern Illinois University Press. p. 54

[30]Abbey, C. J. *Religious thought in Old English verse* http://www.archive.org/stream/
religiousthought00abbeuoft/religiousthought00abbeuoft_djvu.txt (accessed 11/ 12/ 13) p. 13

[31]Greison, H. & J. C. Smith. 1983. *A Critical History of English Poetry* New Jersey: Humanities Press. p.2

[32]Himes, J. 2009. *The Old English Epic of Waldere* Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing. p.25

[33]l. 19

[34]l. 22

In "The Battle of Maldon" the concept of journey is settled explicitly, and the author addresses God. So, in Part II we have Brithmoth's dying words:

He looked up to heaven […] I thank thee, Lord of all peoples/ for all those joysthat I on earth have known./ Now, my Maker mild – I have most need/ that thou to my ghost should grant good./ That my soul to thee may journey,/ into my kingdom – O lord of the Angels,/ may pass with peace – I do desire of thee/ that the hell-fiends may not hurt it.

The rest of the poem has hardly any references to nature; it describes the battle itself: the contact of swords and bodies, as if the poet were present in the battlefield.

6. Conclusions

In the previous lines I have revealed some of the problems I have faced in trying to define and frame the topic of nature in Old English texts. For instance, the dream-vision, considered as a typical characteristic of the literature in this period, has Classic tradition and Judeo-Christian origins. The fact that it is difficult to guess whether Christian poets use it for the explanation of spiritual adventures as an original religious tool.

Added to this, I have tried to explain how poets took both pagan and Christian experiences on the same parallel level, to combine and explore each one in terms of the other. The clearest example is "The Dream of the Rood", where the analogy is direct to the extent that Jesus Christ is presented as a warrior who doesn't show suffering but rather courage.

Similar problems occur with the remaining texts we are dealing with in this paper. Previous studies done on nature in these texts reflect the scarce number of examples taken overall. They are objective and do not fall out of the aim for which they were written and this must be reflected in every one of the lines it is composed. Nonetheless, as we can see there is a subgroup of poems in which interpolations are relevant andare not always just copied from religious scriptures. The need for the division offered was necessary as the distinction between completely pagan and Christian texts cannot represent a source for our study even though Christians represent the most remarkable number of texts. Added to this, once most poets were Christian, they turned away from pagan topics so this period, which represents the interlinking of both currents, did not happen in a way that could be separated in the texts, but through interpolations and additions to the topics they were used to.

Having said this, it is interesting to remark that even though Christian texts are mostly based on the Old Testament, in them God is not represented as a cruel ruler but, in fact, it is men who are cruel on earth or their opponents, as in the case of "Beowulf". The importance of parallelisms in these texts is also notable: there is a great difference between good and evil, as in the example of Beowulf and Grendel (it is interesting how evil in this poem is not represented by a human being but by a dragon. In a way, everybody will agree on the support to the character of Beowulf), the same as there is a parallelism between the coast and mountain, the former being the setting of the elegiac poems. The mountain is rejected as unknown and dangerous. Seasons also represent an interesting element with the role of winter as the most frequently named one. The cold that is felt in winter reflects insecurity, lack of protection, not just in battles but also the feeling of being far from God. Winter is so often used that it also means "years". Spring is only named to express the movement of birds and autumn for the falling of leaves, but both as examples with other purposes, as seen above. The most remarkable examples can be traced in the poems "The Wanderer" and "The Seafarer" where cold can be sensed throughout the poems and this mixture of pagan and Christian concepts are better interlinked. Not only the season, but the tides, sea-birds and other elements related to the sea are expressed in terms of the transience of life and the need to believe in something superior.

On the other hand, in most of the examples seen, nature does not behave like this. Examples of description of landscape are scarce and with the sole purpose: to explain the setting. Religious references are much more explicit such as thanking God, but never praying with the exception of "Beowulf", where the analogy between the hero's behaviors can be traced back to the integrity that the Bible proclaims but, again, nature hardly has a symbolic meaning. Animals are named on very few occasions. All in all, we can conclude by highlighting the lack of examples and originality in the use of nature as a Christian and pagan symbol, with the exception of the most outstanding poems of this period. The poem goes straight to its denotative aim without literary license, while the importance of these poems lies not in the metaphorical meaning but on the descriptive level.

7. Bibliography

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