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The Seafarer

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The Seafarer has a literature about as extensive as that of *The Wanderer*, with which it has certain similarities, on which however it would be dangerous to build too much. The main problems are, first that the poem appears to fall into two unconnected halves with a break in the middle of l. 64, all before being about seafaring while the rest is clearly homiletic, and second that within the first part there appear to be expressed two incompatible attitudes to the sea. The generally accepted answer to the first problem is that the first part of the poem gives a situation on which the homiletic section is based. This makes very good sense, and the correspondence between the discussion of abodes in the first part, ll. 5, 13, 30, 38, and 57 with the reference to our heavenly home at ll. 117 ff. gives strong support. In her edition Mrs. I. L. Gordon does much to abolish the break in l. 64 by placing there a comma with the sentence ending in the middle of l. 66. The problem of the divergent attitudes in the first part caused early commentators to postulate a dialogue between an old and a young sailor, and Professor J. C. Pope has come to a similar conclusion in a recent study. It is however now generally agreed that the poem is a monologue, and that the paradox is one that could well exist in one man's mind, a love of the sea despite an understanding of its hardships and dangers. If this be accepted the only remaining difficulty is the word *sylf* at l. 35, which appears contextually not to fit in with such an interpretation. It has led to such suggestions as that the speaker had hitherto only been on coastal trips and now planned to make a more ambitious journey across the sea. The first part has variously been regarded as literal or allegorical, and related to such figures as the pilgrim.

THE SEAFARER

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Kershaw

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The Seafarer

Mæg ic be mē sylfum sōgied wrecan,
sl̥pas secgan, hū ic geswincdagum
earfoðhwile oft prōwade,
bitre brēostceare gebiden hæbbe,
5 gecunnad in cēole cearselda fela,
atol y̥pa gewealc, þær mec oft bigeat
nearo nihtwaco sæt nacan stefnan
þonne hē be clifum cnossað. Calde geþrunge
wæron mine fēt, forste gebunden
10 caldum clommum. Þær þā ceare seofedun
hāt ymb heortan, hungor innan slāt
merewērges mōd. Þæt se mon ne wāt
þe him on foldan fægrost limpeð
hū ic earmcearig iscealdne sǣ
15 winter wunade wræccan lāstum
winemægum bidroren,
bihongen hrīmgicelum. Hægl scūrum flēag.
Þær ic ne gehyrde būtan hlimman sǣ,
iscaldne wæg. Hwilum ylfete song
20 dyde ic mē tō gomene, ganetes hlēoþor
and huilpan swēg fore hleahtor wera,
mǣw singende fore medodrince.
Stormas þær stānclifu bēotan þær him stearn oncwæð
isigfepera; ful oft þæt earn bigeal
25 hyrnednebbas. Nǣnig hlēomæga
fēasceaftig ferð frēfran meahhte.
For þon him gelyfeð lýt, se þe āh lifes wyn
gebiden in burgum, bealosīpa hwōn,

10. *seofedun*, literally 'lamented'.

21. 'missing' added in translation.

25. *hyrnednebbas*, MS *wrigfepera*. The MS reading does not alliterate and is improbable after l. 24 *isigfepera*. M. E. Goldsmith, 'The Seafarer and the Birds', *Review of English Studies*, N.S., V, 1954, proposed *hyrnednebbas*, suggested by *Judith* l. 212 etc.

Angly?

The Seafarer

I sing my own true story, tell my travels,
How I have often suffered times of hardship
In days of toil, and have experienced
Bitter anxiety, my troubled home
On many a ship has been the heaving waves,
Where grim night-watch has often been my lot
At the ship's prow as it beat past the cliffs.
Oppressed by cold my feet were bound by frost
In icy bonds, while worries simmered hot
About my heart, and hunger from within
Tore the sea-weary spirit. He knows not,
Who lives most easily on land, how I
Have spent my winter on the ice-cold sea,
Wretched and anxious, in the paths of exile,
Lacking dear friends, hung round by icicles,
While hail flew past in showers. There heard I nothing
But the resounding sea, the ice-cold waves.
Sometimes I made the song of the wild swan
My pleasure, or the gannet's call, the cries
Of curlews for the missing mirth of men,
The singing gull instead of mead in hall.
Storms beat the rocky cliffs, and icy-winged
The tern replied, the horn-beaked eagle shrieked.
No patron had I there who might have soothed
My desolate spirit. He can little know
Who, proud and flushed with wine, has spent his time
With all the joys of life among the cities,

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wlonc and wingāl, hū ic wērig oft
 30 in brimlāde bīdan sceolde.
 Nāp nihtscūa, norþan sniwde,
 hrim hrūsan bond, hægl fēol on eorþan,
 corna caldast. For þon cnyssað nū
 heortan geþōhtas þæt ic hēan strēamas,
 35 sealtȳpa gelāc, sylf cunnige;
 monað mōdes lust mæla gehwylce
 ferð tō fēran þæt ic feor heonan
 elþēodigra eard gesēce.
 For þon nis þæs mōdwlonc mon ofer eorþan,
 40 ne his gifena þæs gōd, ne in geoguþe tō þæs hwæt,
 ne in his dædum tō þæs dēor, ne him his dryhten tō
 þæs hold,
 þæt hē ā his sǣfōre sorge næbbe
 tō hwon hine Dryhten gedōn wille.
 Ne biþ him tō hearpan hyge, ne tō hringþege,
 45 ne tō wīfe wyn, ne tō worulde hyht,
 ne ymbe ðwiht elles nefne ymb ȳða gewēalc;
 ac ā hafað longunge se þe on lagu fundað.
 Bearwas blōstmum nimað, byrig fægriað,
 wongas wlitigiað, woruld ðnettedð;
 50 ealle þā gemoniað mōdes fūsne
 sefan tō sīþe þām þe swā þenceð
 on flōdwegas feor gewītan.
 Swylce gēac monað gēomran reorde,
 singeð sumeres weard, sorge bēodeð
 55 bittre in brēosthord. Þæt se beorn ne wāt,
 sēftēadig secg, hwæt þā sume drēogað
 þe þā wræclāstas widost lecgāð.
 For þon nū min hyge hweorfeð ofer hreþerlocan,
 min mōdsefa mid mereflōde

35. *sylf* is difficult and gives support to those who wish to regard this part of the poem as a dialogue.

44. 'harmonious' added in translation.

THE SEAFARER

Safe from such fearful venturings, how I
 Have often suffered weary on the seas.
 Night shadows darkened, snow came from the north,
 Frost bound the earth and hail fell on the ground,
 Coldest of corns. And yet the heart's desires
 Incite me now that I myself should go
 On towering seas, among the salt waves' play;
 And constantly the heartfelt wishes urge
 The spirit to venture, that I should go forth
 To see the lands of strangers far away.
 Yet no man in the world's so proud of heart,
 So generous of gifts, so bold in youth,
In deeds so brave, or with so loyal lord,
That he can ever venture on the sea
Without great fears of what the Lord may bring.
 His mind dwells not on the harmonious harp,
 On ring-receiving, or the joy of woman,
 Or wordly hopes, or anything at all
 But the relentless rolling of the waves;
 But he who goes to sea must ever yearn.
 The groves bear blossom, cities grow more bright,
 The fields adorn themselves, the world speeds up;
 Yet all this urges forth the eager spirit
 Of him who then desires to travel far
 On the sea-paths. Likewise the cuckoo calls
 With boding voice, the harbinger of summer
 Offers but bitter sorrow in the breast.
 The man who's blest with comfort does not know
 What some then suffer who most widely travel
 The paths of exile. Even now my heart
 Journeys beyond its confines, and my thoughts

THE SEAFARER

- 60 ofer hwæles ēpel hweorfeð wide
 eorþan scēatas, cymeð eft tō mē
 gifre and grædig; gielleð ānfloga,
 hweteð on hwælweg hreþer unwearnum
 ofer holma gelagu, for þon mē hātran sind
- 65 Dryhtnes drēamas þonne þis dēade lif
 læne on londe. Ic gelyfe nō
 þæt him eorðwelan ēce stondað.
 Simle þrēora sum þinga gehwylce
 ær his tid āge tō twēon weorpeð;
 70 ādl oþpe ylde oþpe ecghete
 fægum fromweardum feorh oðþringeð.
 For þon biþ eorla gehwām æftercweþendra
 lof lifgendra læstworda betst,
 þæt hē gewyrce, ær hē onweg scyle,
 75 fremum on foldan wið fēonda niþ
 dēorum dædum dēofle tōgēanes,
 þæt hine ælda bearn æfter hergen
 and his lof siþþan lifge mid englum
 āwa tō ealdre, ēcan lifes blæd,

63. 'eager' added in translation.

hwælweg, MS *wælweg*. G. V. Smithers, 'The Meaning of *The Seafarer* and *The Wanderer*', *Medium Ævum*, XXVI, 1957, has ably defended the MS reading, but the rejection of his arguments in Gordon's notes carries more conviction.

64. Most editors put a full stop in mid-line, but Gordon's comma, earlier proposed by S. O. Andrew, *Style and Syntax in Old English*, New York, 1940, p. 33, links the awareness of the joys of the Lord with the problem which occupies the earlier part of the poem and gives the whole a satisfactory thematic logic.

69. *tid age*, MS *tids ge*. The usual emendations are *tīd āgā*, which makes the half-line mean 'before his life departs', and *tīddege* or *tīddæge* meaning 'span of life'. This proposal gives 'before he may have his allotted span'.

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Over the sea, across the whale's domain,
 Travel afar the regions of the earth,
 And then come back to me with greed and longing.
 The cuckoo cries, incites the eager breast
 On to the whale's roads irresistibly,
 Over the wide expanses of the sea,
 Because the joys of God mean more to me
 Than this dead transitory life on land.
 That earthly wealth lasts to eternity
 I don't believe. Always one of three things
 Keeps all in doubt until one's destined hour.
Sickness, old age, the sword, each one of these
May end the lives of doomed and transient men.
 Therefore for every warrior the best
 Memorial is the praise of living men
 After his death, that ere he must depart
 He shall have done good deeds on earth against
 The malice of his foes, and noble works
 Against the devil, that the sons of men
 May after praise him, and his glory live
 For ever with the angels in the splendour
 Of lasting life, in bliss among those hosts.

THE SEAFARER

- 80 drēam mid dugeþum. Dagas sind gewitene,
ealle onmēðlan eorþan rices.
Nearon nū cyningas ne cāseras
ne goldgiefan swylce iū wæron,
þonne hī mæst mid him mārþa gefremedon
85 and on dryhtlicestum dōme lifdon.
Gedroren is þeos duguð eal, drēamas sind gewitene,
wuniað þā wācran and þās woruld healdap,
brūcað þurh bisgo. Blæd is gehnāged,
eorþan indryhto ealdað and sēarað,
90 swā nū monna gehwylc geond middangeard;
yldo him on fareð, onsýn blācað,
gomelfeax gnornað, wāt his iūwine,
æþelinga bearn eorþan forgiefene.
Ne mæg him þonne se flæscho ma þonne him þæt feorg
losað
95 ne swēte forswelgan ne sār gefēlan
ne hond onhrēran ne mid hyge þencan.
Þeah þe græf wille golde strēgan
brōþor his geborenum, byrgan be dēadum
māþmum mislicum þæt hine mid wille,
100 ne mæg þære sǣwle þe biþ synna ful
gold tō gēoce for Godes egsan,
þonne hē hit ær hýdeð þenden hē hēr leofað.
Micel biþ se Meotudes egsa, for þon hī sēo molde
oncyrrað;
se gestaþelade stiþe grundas,
105 eorþan scēatas and uprodor.
Dol biþ se þe him his Dryhten ne ondrædeþ; cymeð him
se dēað unþinged.

80-90. Medieval man believed that he was living in the sixth of the Seven Ages and that the earth had deteriorated and was deteriorating. See the account of the Seven Ages by V. A. Kolve, *The Play Called Corpus Christi*, London, 1966, Chapters III-V.

102. 'Ready before his death' added in translation.

THE SEAFARER

The great old days have gone, and all the grandeur
Of earth; there are not Caesars now or kings
Or patrons such as once there used to be,
Amongst whom were performed most glorious deeds,
Who lived in lordliest renown. Gone now
Is all that host, the splendours have departed.
Weaker men live and occupy the world,
Enjoy it but with care. Fame is brought low,
Earthly nobility grows old, decays,
As now throughout this world does every man.
Age comes on him, his countenance grows pale,
Grey-haired he mourns, and knows his former lords,
The sons of princes, given to the earth.
Nor when his life slips from him may his body
Taste sweetness or feel pain or stir his hand
Or use his mind to think. And though a brother
May strew with gold his brother's grave, and bury
His corpse among the dead with heaps of treasure,
Wishing them to go with him, yet can gold
Bring no help to the soul that's full of sins,
Against God's wrath, although he hide it here
Ready before his death while yet he lives.
Great is the might of God, by which earth moves;
For He established its foundations firm,
The land's expanses, and the sky above.
Foolish is he who does not fear his Lord,
For death will come upon him unprepared.

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Ēadig bið se þe ēaþmōð leofaþ; cymeð him sēo ār of
 heofonum;
 Meotod him þæt mōd gestaþelað for þon hē in His
 meahthe gelyfeð.
 Stieran mon sceal strongum mōde, and þæt on
 stapelum healdan,

110 and gewis wērum, wisum clāne.
 Scyle monna gehwylc mid gemete healdan
 wiþ lēofne and wið lāþne bealo,
 þeah þe hē hine wille fyres fulne,
 oþþe on bāle forbærnedne
 115 his geworhtne wine, wyrd biþ swiþre,
 Meotud meahtigra þonne ānges monnes gehygd.
 Uton wē hycgan hwær wē hām āgen
 and þonne geþencan hū wē þider cumen,
 and wē þonne ēac tilien þæt wē tō mōten
 120 in þā ēcan ēadignesse,
 þær is lif gelong in lufan Dryhtnes,
 hyht in heofonum. Ðæs sý þām Hālgan þonc
 þæt Hē ūsic geweorþade, wuldres Ealdor,
 ēce Dryhten, in ealle tid.

Amen.

112-14. Corruption in these lines makes the sense irrecoverable. The most useful notes are those of Gordon, whom I have followed in the translation.

THE SEAFARER

Blessed is he who humble lives; for grace
 Shall come to him from heaven. The Creator
 Shall make his spirit steadfast, for his faith
 Is in God's might. Man must control himself
 With strength of mind, and firmly hold to that,
 True to his pledges, pure in all his ways.
 With moderation should each man behave
 In all his dealings with both friend and foe.
 No man will wish the friend he's made to burn
 In fires of hell, or on an earthly pyre,
 Yet fate is mightier, the Lord's ordaining
 More powerful than any man can know.
 Let us think where we have our real home,
 And then consider how we may come thither;
 And let us labour also, so that we
 May pass into eternal blessedness,
 Where life belongs amid the love of God,
 Hope in the heavens. The Holy One be thanked
 That He has raised us up, the Prince of Glory,
 Lord without end, to all eternity.

Amen.

Dark Ages =
 curse of god?
 slave religion