The Wanderer by W. H. Auden

Auden’s early poem (1930) written just after his own wanderings to Germany which, in its pre-Hitler days tolerated homosexuality, owes a lot to an Old English (Anglo-Saxon) original. He makes in it extended use of Old English poetry conventions – the alliterative line, the kenning, a very English diction. It has some of the murkiness of the first major English poem, Beowulf; and some of the challenge of finding a meaning that we associate with Old English riddles. At the end, as in so many Anglo-Saxon poems, it reveals itself as a prayer. From the point of view of your likely examination question, this work is handy as providing another example of the effects of alienation from home, though unlike Piano and The Self-Unseeing it is not the result of lost childhood nor, as in anyone lived in a pretty how town, the result of being an outsider from your own community, but something more physical (though the physical distancing from home could also be interpreted as metaphorical).

The extract below (I don’t know the author) gives some useful background on Anglo-Saxon attitudes, and makes an even more useful comparison of the Old English poem and Auden’s take on it.

Note that “Old English” is a technical term referring to our language up to the Thirteenth Century. Never use it for anything later!

I. Anglo-Saxon England

Introduction: the concept of the Germanic hero

A Germanic hero is not simply a man who can fight well. As is indicated on p. 5 of the Norton Anthology (vol. 1), his values are based on a strong sense of belonging to a group, and this sense of kinship will make him feel responsible for the welfare of his family and society. In the cold North of Europe, nature is a formidable enemy, and surrounding tribes may not make life easier either. As a human being and even as a small group based on the extended family, you are often confronted with your own insignificance. Dealing with these dangers by organising society in an efficient and coherent manner, is an essential requirement for the hero at all times. He stimulates social cohesion by rewarding loyalty with generous presents. Thus a king is often called a “Giver of Treasure,” or “Ring-Giver,” or “Lord of the Rings.” He knows how to farm the land in times of peace, and how to build defences and organise battle in times of war. Since a lot of transport took place via water, a hero also knows how a man should deal with the power of the wind and the waves.

A. Religious and secular poetry (Caedmon, Beowulf)

Unsurprisingly, it is in terms of the heroic leader’s gifts and virtues that Caedmon describes the Christian God in his “Hymn to Creation.” The great epic Beowulf (first half of the 8th century), ultimately deals with a more secular and pagan world, and has as its basis the same concept of the Germanic hero. Both these works were dealt with in more detail in the course on European Literature.

B. Elegiac poetry: The Wanderer

1. The Old English poem (manuscript ca. 975): a mixture of heroic and Christian elements (the literal and the allegorical levels)

On a more literal level, The Wanderer evokes the pain and misery of a man who finds himself isolated from his social group. Over the “water-way” he has to “tread the tracks of exile,” and he mourns the fact that he has to miss the good advice of a wise leader; he “has had long to forgo the counsel of a beloved lord,” and has dreams of the “old days when he took part in the gift-giving” and laid his hands and head on the knee of his Ring-Giver to strengthen the bonds of loyalty and friendship. A rude awakening awaits him among screeching sea-birds, frost and snow-fall. His mournful mood is evoked in the ubi sunt motif (where are now the good things of the past?): “Alas, the mailed warrior! Alas the prince’s glory!”
On a deeper, more spiritual level, this lament can be read allegorically as a description of the soul rather than that of mind and body. This level of interpretation is suggested as early as in the first line: the lord whose mildness the exile hopes to find again is the Lord of the heavens, i.e. God himself. Ultimately “all this earthly habitation shall be emptied” (p. 113) and we all need redemption through God’s love when we have failed to live in his divine grace. The text also ends on this allegorical note: “It will be well with him who seeks favour, comfort from the Father in heaven, where for us all stability resides.” Whereas Caedmon’s hymn was mainly spiritual in its meaning, and Beowulf mainly secular, this lament combines the literal and the spiritual meaning and holds them in perfect balance.

In its original form, this text is written in alliterative verse, making ample use of kinnings (for instance, the lord is called a “giver of treasure”) and sound effects that enhance the meaning. The translation is excellent, but loses a great deal of the effect of these techniques.

2. Comparison with W.H. Auden’s “The Wanderer”

When the leading English poet W.H. Auden died in 1973, Time magazine had a long obituary under the heading “The Sage of Anxiety,” which made an allusion to his book entitled The Age of Anxiety (1947). A fundamental human fear, which Auden learnt to define in terms of existentialist philosophy, takes concrete shape in his poetry in many forms. One of these forms is directly influenced by Anglo-Saxon poetry. In a number of poems, Auden uses both the themes and verse forms of Old English literary texts.

A fine example of this is his poem “The Wanderer” (1930), whose title is exactly the same as that of the most famous Old English lament. Here he uses kinnings like “sea-dingle” (literally a valley in the sea, i.e. a place where the water is deeper and possibly more dangerous), “places for fishes” (the sea), and “place-keepers” (doors).

Fate (or the Germanic wyrd) has exiled Auden’s wanderer not only to distant seas, but also to strange lands. He is “lonely on fell as chat,” which means that he finds himself as much alone in inhospitable high moorlands as a chat (a song-bird, in French: “le traquet rubicole”). Nothing has been able to keep him in the company of his society: “Upon what[ever] man it fall (…) [t]hat he should leave his house,” even in the mildest of seasons (in spring, for instance, when the snow melts, flowers appear and there is new hope), not even the soft hand of a woman can hold him. Fate is stronger than “restraint by women.” This emphasis in Auden’s poem on the love of a woman, the modern wanderer’s dreams of her warm welcome when he returns home, and his fears of her unfaithfulness when he wakes up (“through doorway voices/ Of new men making another love”), is alien to the text of the original Wanderer. Auden has adapted the Anglo-Saxon text to a society that is less male-oriented.

In Auden’s text, there is less of a direct allusion to a possible return of the wandering soul to God’s divine grace, but the third stanza is definitely a kind of prayer or supplication to the forces that govern our fate. In the house of our anxiety (our “anxious house”) we count the days and have no certainty about when we shall be reconciled to our human existence. The higher powers, however, may convert the number of days during which we have to wait “from vague to certain,” which means that an end may be in sight, and the joy of our return to a situation in which we feel at home and see some light in our dark existence may not be too far off.

Conclusion

Auden is not the only one who has found in Old English poetry a powerful evocation of how small, insignificant and anxious human beings may feel in an existence that does not seem to be particularly accommodating. In Anglo-Saxon literature, Christian hope is not taken for granted, and paradoxically, the oldest bards whose texts have survived in the English language are often closer to the mentality of readers in the 21st century than their later medieval successors.

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1 In accordance with prevailing bibliographical rules, the title of Auden’s short poem is put between quotation marks, whereas long poems, like the Old English The Wanderer, have their titles in italics.