

**THE SEMIOTICS OF ALLEGORY IN EARLY MEDIEVAL  
HERMENEUTICS AND THE INTERPRETATION OF  
*THE SEAFARER***

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This paper deals with recent interpretations of the Old English *Seafarer* which have proposed either allegorical or literal readings of the text. Special attention is given to the placement of the poem within an eschatological tradition which recommended the proper behaviour of Christians in view of the approach of Doomsday at the end of the first millennium. The observation that none of the two perspectives conflict with each other leads to a definition of the poem as a symbolic work which, within a didactic framework, combines the literal and the allegorical. Classical and medieval theories of allegory may ultimately support this description and help to classify it as *allegoria quae verbis fit*: the hermeneutic process which functions by the direct addition of further symbolical signifieds and referents to the ones usually attributed to the textual signifiers.

The variety of interpretations of the Old English *Seafarer* have been compressed into two main categories: approaches based on the literal meaning of the text and proposals of allegorical readings for the same textual material. The literal standpoint was established primarily by Whitelock's explanation of the poem as the narration of the tribulations of a Christian pilgrim who leads an uncomfortable life of rigour on earth in order to obtain the bliss of eternal salvation in heaven. This *peregrinus pro amore dei* wavers at the beginning between submitting to the ascetic rules which govern his perilous journey and enjoying the pleasures and luxuries of a safe life on the mainland. Eventually he decides to face the difficulties of the journey, to escape from the materialistic world which surrounds him, and thus, to find the definite *elbeodigra eard* (38) —the "true home of the pilgrim" (Whitelock 1950, 262-72).

The allegorical tradition was vindicated early in this century by Schücking (1917, 97-115) and supported by Anderson (1937) and Smithers (1957, 137-53). According to these scholars, the poem is a symbolic description of the exile which mankind has been condemned to suffer in this world since the fall of Adam. The seafarer's sad yearning for the journey stands for the Christian desire to return to eternal life after death, thus escaping back to the place where he was banished from: the heavenly homeland or *elþeodigra eard*; his anxiety, on the other hand, is a natural condition before entering the critical juncture of death. In view of this assumption, *The Seafarer* most likely had resulted from the assimilation of an eschatological tradition founded on two topics commonly accepted in early medieval thought. Firstly, the awesome conception that the end of the world and the Day of Judgement were near. The extension of the six days of Creation to calculate the duration of world history might have led the Christian Anglo-Saxons who witnessed the approach of the first millennium to believe that they were living the sixth and last age of the world, after which they would enjoy, during the seventh one, the eternity which follows Judgement (Smithers 1957, 140-44; Trahern 1991, 165).

This symbolic extension of God's providential purpose to account for all historical unfolding was originally based on a *typological* treatment of the passages from the New Testament which touch upon the genealogy of Christ, Matthew 1:1-17 and Luke 3:23-38. It was given a definite role in history by Eusebius of Caesarea (260-340) when he used it as the framework for his *Chronicon*; the enlargement of this work by Saint Jerome (347-419/420), Prosper of Aquitaine (390-463) and Isidore of Seville (560-636) might have made of the subject one of the greatest concerns for the learned communities of Anglo-Saxon England, as attested by Bede's attempt to locate the date when the world was doomed to be destroyed in *De temporibus* (703) and *De temporum ratione* (725). Secondly, the Christian perception of the discord between the human and the divine concepts of time led to the scrutiny of the lineal, irreversible progression of the present, which foregrounds the decay of the world and presages its imminent end, and the necessity for Christians to look forward to the future as the occasion to enjoy in Heaven the expected reward of permanence and eternity.

The notions that the end of the world was impending and that the Christians ought to be prepared for it are expressed in several medieval homilies

and religious treatises, but undoubtedly their most prominent source is to be found in the works of St Augustine (354-430).<sup>1</sup> In *Confessiones* (10:15; 11:11.13; 11:13.16), *Enarratio in Psalmum XXXVIII* (7), *Enarratio in Psalmum CIX* (20) and *Epistula CXVIII* (3.15) he refers to the impossibility of comparing eternity, as it prevails in the spiritual city of God, to the inherent transience of the kingdoms which man inhabits. He also insists that all creatures which have been created *ex nihilo* are immersed in a fleeting world where everything is variable and doomed to destruction. Moreover, in *Enarratio in Psalmum CI* (10) and *Confessiones* (4:10.15), he mentions the clash between the desire of man to find eternal being and the incessant flow of time and proposes the Christian solution to this conflict: to love what is subject to the effects of time in a temporary way, and to seek infinitely for the essence of this eternal being —thus renouncing the pleasures of this world and leading a life *secundum Deum* as an exiled pilgrim desiring eternal salvation after death and aspiring to the heavenly home (Pegueroles 1972, 61-81). This facet of St Augustine's neoplatonic doctrine of predestination was widely known in Anglo-Saxon England, possibly spread by the translations of his *Soliloquia* and of his disciple Orosius' *Historiarum adversus paganos* by order of King Alfred in the late ninth century, or simply due to the wide circulation of his works among the learned religious communities of Europe.

The main tenets of this eschatological vision are reflected in *The Seafarer*. The closeness of the first millennium to the probable time of the elegy's composition and the comprehension of these Christian doctrines by its author/s contribute to model the poem as the expression of a historical anxiety which is confirmed by the observation of the surrounding world in full physical and moral decline:

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<sup>1</sup> Among the early religious treatises which expound this eschatological vision of the world and may have functioned as an indirect source for the contents of *The Seafarer*, Smithers mentions Cyprian's tract *Ad Demetrianum* (252) (1957, 142-43). The topic also has analogues in the works of Christian poets of the fifth to seventh centuries, such as Dracontius' *Carmen de laudibus Dei* (late 5th century), St Columban's *De vanitate et miseria vitae mortalis*, *Ad Hunaldum epistula* and *Ad Fedolium epistula* (543-615), Eugenius of Toledo's *De brevitatis huius vitae* (646-648), and possibly some of Prudentius' autobiographical verses (405). Critics have also noticed certain parallels in the Anglo-Saxon homiletic tradition; particularly *Blickling Homilies* number X and XI, the Pseudo-Wulfstan Homily number XXX, and Homily number XLIX of the Wulfstan Collection (Allen and Calder 1976: 146-54).

Dagas sind gewitene,  
 ealle onmedlan eorþan rices;  
 nearon nu cyningas ne caseras  
 ne goldgiefan swylce iu wæron,  
 þonne hi mæst mid him mærþa gefremedon  
 ond on dryhtlicestum dome lifdon.  
 Gedroren is þeos duguð eal, dreamas sind gewitene;  
 wuniað þa wacran ond þas woruld healdþ,  
 brucað þurh bisgo. Blæd is gehnæged,  
 eorþan indryhto ealdað ond searað,  
 swa nu monna gehwylc geond middangeard (80b-90)<sup>2</sup>

[The days are gone, all the magnificence of the kingdoms of the world; there are not now kings, nor emperors, nor gold-givers as once there were, when they performed among themselves the most glorious deeds and lived in lordliest repute. Fallen is all this noble company, joys are departed; the weakest things inhabit and possess this world, dominate it through toil and trouble. Glory is brought low, the nobility of the world grows old and fades, as now does everyone throughout the earth.]

Thus, the poet prepares the ground for the exposition of Augustinian thought and, after having foregrounded the differences between *Dryhtnes dreamas* (65a) [the joys of the Lord] and *þis deade lif læne on londe* (65b-66a) [this dead life, fleeting on land], closes the composition with a homiletic reference to the argument that the only salvation after the impending Doomsday lies in the pursuit of the spiritual truth:

Uton we hycgan hwær we ham agen,  
 ond þonne geþencan hu we þider cumen;  
 ond we þonne eac tilie þæt we to moten  
 in þa ecan eadignesse,  
 þær is lif gelong in lufan Dryhtnes,  
 hyht in heofonum. Þæs sy þam Halgan þonc  
 þæt he usic geweorþade, wuldres Ealdor  
 ece Dryhten, in ealle tid. Amen. (117-24)

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<sup>2</sup> All references to the poem are from Ian Gordon, ed. 1960. *The Seafarer*. Manchester: Manchester U.P.

[Let us think where we have our home, and then consider how we may get there; and we shall then also labour so that we are allowed into that eternal blessedness, where the source of life is, in the love of the Lord, bliss in the heavens. For that let there be thanks to the Holy God, He who has honoured us, Prince of Glory, eternal Lord for all time. Amen.]

However, the presentation of these two motives in the second part of *The Seafarer* does not exhibit the structure of allegory at all. Lines 66b-71 and 80b-90 illustrate the reference in 65b-66a to the transitory —*læne*— nature of human life by emphasizing the gradual fading of all prosperity (66b-67), the disappearance of human beings due to *adl oþþe ylde oþþe ecghete* (70) [illness or age or the enmity of the sword], and by proffering a general declaration of the volatile essence of worldly powers and glories, unfailingly replaced by *bisgum* [toils] and *wacnesum* [weak things] (87a-88a). Lines 72-80a and 91-102 link this view of the world in full decline with the admonitory closing section by metaphorically alluding to the correct moral behaviour of the Anglo-Saxon nobleman, who must not evade *se Meotudes egða* (103a) [the awesome power of the Creator] by accumulating treasures and burying them *be deadum* (98b) [beside the dead]; rather, he must act on earth against the malice of foes

þæt hine ælda bearn æfter hergen,  
 ond his lof siþþan lifge mid englum  
 awa to ealdre, ecan lifes blæd,  
 dream mid dugeþum (77-80a)

[so that the sons of men may afterwards praise him, and his fame may live since then among the angels forever, the eternal glory of life, joy among the noblest hosts]

Finally, lines 103-16 function as a transition to the homiletic epilogue: they introduce the precept that the Christians should prepare themselves on earth for Judgement Day; these verses also give hints about the moderate behaviour which may help them to attain their definite end after life.

Only when the first part of the poem is read in light of this didactic exposition can it be comprehended as “an exemplum in physical terms of the spiritual lesson expounded in the second part” (Greenfield, 1969: 213-14).

Accordingly, the critics who have classified it as allegory tend to look for references to the eschatological concepts in the images of the first part and even attempt to relate them to Christian literary, homiletic or apologetic traditions. The figure of the seafarer and the act of seafaring were used in previous ecclesiastical writings as metaphors of Adam's experience after the expulsion from Paradise and hence are extended to cover all his descendants: the Christian community. The actual practice of ascetic peregrination might have encouraged the choice of this symbol to render the Augustinian perception of man as *peregrinus* on earth after Adam's banishment. Within this hermeneutic tradition the sea represents the *mare vitae*, and therefore stands for the toils and troubles of human life on earth (Ehrismann 1909, 209-39; Smithers 1957, 151; Osborn 1978, 1-6).<sup>3</sup> The textual arrangement of these motives accommodates more certainly the exemplifying function of eschatological Christian doctrine which Greenfield attaches to them. In this sense, the seafarer's journey admits a twofold interpretation. In the opening lines, the description of a wintry seascape, connected with different physical or psychological manifestations of human misfortune —cold, thirst, loneliness— reinforce the role of this image as a symbol of all that is tragic, threatening and dangerous in worldly life (Higley 1988, 23-29). These elements are combined in lines 4-12a to produce a moving picture of the seafarer's *geswincdagas* (*days of hardship*) and *earfoðhwila* (*times of hardship*) (2b-3a):

<sup>3</sup> Several sources and parallels for this didactic adaptation of the images of sea and seafaring have been proposed. Besides some passages from the Bible —Hebrews 11:13-16; Matthew 8:23-27, 14:27-33; Luke 5:3, 8:22-25; Mark 4:36-39, 6:45-52; John 6:16-21— Smithers highlights the role of patristic exegesis, particularly: chapter XII of Tertullian's *De Baptismo* (155/160-220), the third Homily of Origen (c. 185-254), chapter XXVI of Cyprian's *De mortalitate* (250?), some sections of the *Moralia in Job* by Pope Gregory the Great (540-604), and, especially, St Augustine's *De libero arbitrio* (3:186), *Enarratio in Psalmum CXXV* and *De civitate Dei* (15:2), on the one hand, and John Cassian's preface to his *Collations of the Fathers* (430?), on the other. The former stand out as sources for the first part of *The Seafarer* when they list the stages of man's exile from Paradise, compare them to a peregrination and propound the two options which human free will has in order to return to its true home in Heaven: living *secundum Deum* or *secundum hominem*. The latter was actually recommended by St Benedict to his reformed communities and therefore became a classic for most literate Anglo-Saxons of the tenth century. Analogues contemporary to the poem comprise the pseudo-Augustinian sermon *Quare natus et passus sit Christus*, Hrabanus Maurus' *Allegoriae in Sacram Scripturam* (780-856) and some sermons and poems preserved in Anglo-Saxon manuscripts: Aelfric's *Homily on Shrove Sunday* (990-992), Wulfstan's Homily number I, *Blickling Homily* number II and Alcuin's poem *De rerum humanarum vicissitudine et clade Lindisfarnensis* (793) (Smithers 1957, 145-50; Osborn 1978, 5).

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 geþrunge  
 wæron mine fet, forste gebunden  
 caldum clommum, þæ þa ceare seofedum  
 hat ymb heortan; hungor innan slat  
 merewerges mod. (4-12a)

[ (I) have endured bitter breast-care, explored aboard ship many aspects of sorrow, the terrible rolling of the waves, where often the dangerous night-watch occupied me at the vessel's prow when it dashes beside the cliffs. Chilled with cold were my feet, bound with the cold fetters of frost, where those cares sighed hot around my heart; hunger tore within the heart of he who is weary of the sea.]

After the mishaps of previous voyages are contrasted to the prosperous life of *se þe ah lifes wyn / gebiden in burgum* (27b-28a) [he who has experienced the pleasure of life in the cities], the narrator mentions his fears before setting out on a completely different journey; this may be inferred from the phrases he uses to describe it —*hean streamas* (34b) [high seas], *feor heonan* (37b) [far hence]—, which emphasize the difficulties of the enterprise, and from the meaning of the verb *cunnian* (35b) [explore, venture upon], which accentuates the unfamiliar milieu the seafarer is about to confront:

	Forþon cnyssað nu
heortan geþohtas	þæt ic hean streamas,
sealtyþa gelac	sylf cunninge -
monað modes lust	mæla gehwylce
ferð to feran,	þæt ic feor heonan
elþeodigra	eard gesece - (33b-38)

[Therefore thoughts now oppress my heart that I should myself explore the high seas, the salt wave's tumult, my heart's desire urges my spirit all the time to set out, so that I may seek the true home of the pilgrim far hence.]

As a paradox, however, he asserts in the first person that his fervour to discover the home of the pilgrim is stronger than any fears which may discourage him from travelling, and that he has anxiety concerning both *his seafore* (42a) [his voyage] and *hwon hine Dryhten gedon wille* (43) [what the Lord will propose for him]. The obvious religious reasons of his quest may help to see the second journey as a spiritual endeavour, a desire for contemplation possibly related to death and to a personal longing for the encounter with eternal life after it. As such it contrasts with the first purgative voyage near the easy life on mainland, whose secular pleasures are rejected in favour of the navigation which leads to salvation (Smithers 1957, 148-49; Osborn 1978, 1-6; Holton 1982, 208-17). The expected sequel is the definite renouncement of earthly enjoyments and the insistence on the *longunge* (47a) [longing] for the journey which leads to the heavenly home:

Ne biþ him to hearpan hyge	ne to hringþege -
ne to wife wyn	ne to worulde hyht -
ne ymb owiht elles	nefne ymb yða gewealc;
ac a hafað longung	se þe on lagu fundað (44-47)

[There is for him no thought of the harp, of receiving the rings, of delight in woman, of pleasure in the world, or about anything else except the rolling of the waves; but always had sad yearning he who is eager to go on to the ocean.]<sup>4</sup>

The scholars who sustain the allegorical tradition have given the picture of spring depicted in lines 48-55 a twofold interpretation:

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<sup>4</sup> Cross identifies Augustine's sermon *De cantico novo* as a possible source for these lines; there he considered the idea that earthly loves must not be reason for the Christian to avoid the journey to his homeland (1959, 106). I would further propose that the whole doctrine of use and enjoyment, advanced by the latter in various sections of *De doctrina Christiana* (1:4.4, 1:20.20), *De civitate Dei* (15:7), *De musica* (4:14.16) and *De vera religione* (22.43) might have been apprehended by the author/s of *The Seafarer* and lie behind the content of these verses. Particularly in *De doctrina Christiana* (1:4.4) St Augustine discusses the tenet that the objects of creation do not include evil among their properties, but that this evil pertains only to the proper use (*utii*) or enjoyment (*fruiti*) which man makes of them: this always being guided by the end of enjoying God; these ideas are connected with a description of the activities of man as a pilgrim who has freely decided to live in this world looking for his "native land".



Bearwas blostmum nimað, byrig fægriað,	
wongas wlitigað,	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.	(48-55)

[Woods take on blossoms, make beautiful the cities, brighten the meadows, the world hastens; all those urge the spirit of the eager one, (urge) the mind to the journey, (urge) one who thinks to depart far upon the seas. Likewise, the cuckoo admonishes with its sad voice, sings the summer's herald, announces sorrow, sadness in the breast.]

These lines may reinforce the definition of *The Seafarer* as a Christian symbolic poem when they link the description of spring's regenerative power, urging the mariner to a spiritual revival, with the limited transitoriness of worldly life, as both recur in analogous homilies, such as numbers V and X of the *Blickling Corpus* (Smithers 1959a, 7; Whittier 1968, 407-409). The phrase *woruld onetteð* (49b), which may be translated here either as "the world breaks into life" or as "the world hastens", helps to connect both motives: the awakening of vegetative life in spring and that of a fleeting world rushing towards its end (Cross 1959, 104-106). However, there is no textual evidence which supports the reference of these lines to the impending Doomsday and human resurrection after it, as Blake (1962, 163-64) and Greenfield (1981, 199-211) have proposed.

Finally, lines 58-64a are appreciated, in connection with the didactic content of the second part, as a symbol of the "wished-for death of the person speaking" constructed in terms of "a belief that at death the soul would make a journey by sea to the abode of the dead" (Smithers 1959a, 20):

For þon 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 hwælweg	hreþer unwearnum
ofer holma gelagu . . .	(58-64a)

[Therefore now my mind wanders beyond the enclosure of my breast, my spirit with the sea tide over the whales' domain crosses widely the expanses of the earth, comes back to me, eager and greedy, the solitary flier cries, incites the heart irresistibly on to the paths of the whales, across the seas' expanses ...]

To support this hypothesis Smithers has found Scandinavian analogues —*Grimnismal* 20, *Havarðs Saga Isfirðings*, *Porðar Saga Hreðu*— where the soul (OE *hyge* – ON *hugr*) is portrayed as a constituent detachable from the body, which, therefore, is able to make its way swiftly to any goal, as if in a temporary absence complementing the final separation at death (1959a, 14-22). In this sense, he does not accept the amendment of *wælweg* in line 63a to the kenning *hwælweg*, but still relates the former to the noun *wæl* [dead body] and translates the compound as “road leading to the abode of the dead”. He also derives *anfloga* (62b) [solitary flier] from the verb *onfleogan* [to attack by flying] and, bearing in mind the Scandinavian substratum of these verses, posits an association with a mythological creature similar to the Valkyries (1957, 137-39; 1959a, 20-22; 1959b, 99-100).

This interpretation has been rejected by Gordon (1960, 41) and Clemons (1969, 72-77) on the grounds that it is difficult to assume a direct heathen influence on a poem with a Christian didactic aim. In addition, the indication that the soul returns to the body —*cymeð eft to me* (61b) [comes back to me]— and the possibility of explaining *anfloga* as a metaphor for the bird —*geac* (53a)— whose melody encouraged the seafarer to embark, do not fit into Smithers' account. Therefore, they propose that these verses literally depict the belief that the soul was a detachable entity which, in this case, leaves its physical dwelling to explore the benefits of the spiritual journey and communicate them to its master, stimulating him to depart.

The allegorical approach just outlined makes good sense of the first part of *The Seafarer* and is supported by a number of analogous Christian works which have recourse to similar imagery. However, there are obvious flaws in this interpretation —see the above discussion of lines 48-55 and 58-64a— which have prevented other critics from cataloguing the poem as a structurally perfect allegory. Moreover, this explanation does not conflict with the literal reading of the text as the exposition by an experienced Christian mariner of the physical and psychological reasons in favour of embarking on an ascetic peregrination or against it. None of these viewpoints questions the global meaning of *The Seafarer*: the themes of the ascetic self-denial, the *contemptus mundi* scorn of transience and the longing for a heavenly release of earthly concerns. If taken singly, however, they are not inclusive of all dimensions of the poem's art (Foley 1983, 69). It seems that both combine, at surface and deep levels, to express entirely the final pedagogical aim of the composition. Accordingly, it can be defined as a lyrical and symbolic poem which, within a didactic framework, does not split the literal from the allegorical. I would like to inquire further into the possible combination of the two perspectives by reviewing the theoretical approaches to allegory prevailing in the Middle Ages which might lie behind the actual design of the poem and, thus, shed some light on the contemporary debate.

A paradigmatic approach to allegory within the classical tradition is offered in Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria* 8.6,44. He interprets lines 14-15 of Horatio's *Carmen I* —“o navis, referent in mare te novi/fluctus; o quid agis? fortiter occupa/ portum”— as a continuous transference of meaning: from the ship (*navis*) to the state (*re publica*), from the waves and winds (*fluctus et tempestates*) to the civil wars (*bellis civilibus*), and from the harbour (*portum*) to peace and tranquility (*pace atque concordia*). He then proposes a well-known definition of this figure of thought: “allegoria facit continua metaphora” (9.2,46). Lausberg understands that this explanation links allegory to the expression of one thing in words and another in meaning; that is, the extension *per immutationem* of the *res* (thought) normally associated with a particular *verbum* (word or phrase) to a different *res*, so that it suits the *voluntas* of the orator (1960, vol. 2, 283-84). This standpoint considers solely the role of allegory as a textual trope and favours,

therefore, the level of discourse production; however, other classical authors added a necessary function at the level of discourse reception or textual exegesis. Aristotle's *De interpretatione* explained allegory both as the expression and the interpretation of hidden meaning and assigned a separate discipline to each: *rhetoriké* to the elocutionary one, *grammatiké* to the exegetical one. The distinction between both modes was later reinforced by the Roman stoic linguists who allocated the figure either to the sphere of the *schemata lexeos*, which was concerned with reception and was proper for study by grammarians, or to the *schemata dianoeas*, which was related to expression and was suitable for the activity of rhetoricians (Irvine 1987, 35-38; Domínguez Caparrós 1993, 94-101). This clear-cut difference between allegory as trope (an instance of production which operates within the text by expressing some other meaning in addition to the primary sense of a statement) and allegory as exegesis (an instance of reception which functions at the level of discourse reference and leads to the discovery of the additional meaning) was, however, muddled by the Christian philosophers of the early Middle Ages. They promoted the latter to the role of standard interpretative foundation and, therefore, undervalued the role of the former (Curtius 1948, 292; Strubel 1975, 342).

The high estimation of allegory as the main means for textual decoding has biblical roots —Isaiah 6:9-10, Matthew 13:13-15, Paul's Epistle to Galatians 4:21-29—, but it certainly originates in the adoption of the Stoic system by the earliest commentators of the Scriptures. Book V of Clement of Alexandria's *Stromatai* (c. II-III), Origen's *De principiis* (231) and Jerome's "De optimo genere oratorum" (c. IV-V) definitely assert that the revelations of the Bible, due to their double nature —human and divine—, tend to contain a hidden meaning beyond their literal expression, whose comprehension requires overcoming some implicit difficulties. From this perspective, all interpretation is allegorical since it does not seek to duplicate the text on the level of expression, but posits a latent, univocal subtext concealed in the original one (Irvine 1987, 45; Domínguez Caparrós 1993, 132-73). Difficulty is, finally, essential not only for the protection of the content of Scriptures, but also to distract the reader from the attractiveness of the expression and to signal that something beyond the letter is intended (Huppe 1959, 33): "cum aliqua difficultate quaesita multo gratius

inveniri” (Augustine, vol. 15, 103) [when something is searched for with difficulty it is as a result more delightfully discovered.]<sup>5</sup>

The inequitable preference for exegetical allegory also pervades the treatises which Augustine devotes to the theory of signs. Only in *De Trinitate* (15:9.15) does he define allegory as trope —”Quid est allegoria nisi tropus ubi ex alio aliud intelligitur” (Augustine, vol. 5, 722) [What is allegory, but a trope whereby one thing is said and another one understood?]- while most of his words on the subject discuss its role as interpretative device. Particularly in *De doctrina Christiana* (2), *De ordine* (2:12.25), and *De dialectica* (5), St Augustine defines a special relationship between *verbum*, *signum* and *res* during the process of communication which leads to allegorical reception (*De dialectica*, 5):<sup>6</sup>

Verbum est unius cuiusque rei signum, quod ab audiente possit intellegi, a loquente probatum. Res est quidquid vel sentitur, vel intellegitur vel latet. Signum est quod et se ipsum sensui et praecer se aliquid animo ostendit. (*Apud Irvine* 1987, 52)

[A word (*verbum*) is a sign (*signum*) of any kind (*res*) which is uttered by a speaker and can be understood by an auditor. A thing is whatever is perceived or is understood or remains hidden. A sign is that which is both perceived in itself and which indicates to the mind something beyond itself.]

The necessary adaptation of meanings and senses to the Christian tenet that everything in the universe is a sign of God leads to further distinctions between, on the one hand, *signa naturalia*, *signa data* and *signa divinitus data* (*De doctrina Christiana* 2:1.2.) and, on the other,

<sup>5</sup> The passage is from *De doctrina Christiana* 2:6.8. It must be noted that the excessive importance conferred to allegorical interpretation may result in the constant deferral of complete or ultimate meaning, which causes what Irvine calls “semiotic anxiety”: “a seemingly endless rewriting of texts in a chain of commentary which can never be arrested; the interpreter can never capture, once and for all, the univocal logos stripped of its textual representations . . . since exegesis can never exhaust the possibilities for meaning which the exegete attempts to draw out” (1987, 63-64). Thus, Augustine in *Confessiones* (12:27) compares scriptural decoding to a fountain of discourse which spills over from a narrow source to many other rivers of discourse.

<sup>6</sup> For an outline of the fundamentals of Augustine’s theory of signs see, among others, Jackson (1972, 92-147), Todorov (1982, 15-59), Eden (1987, 45-63) and Bobes Naves (1989; 52-4, 148-49).

*signa propria* and *signa translata* (*De doctrina christiana* 2:10.15). This twofold classification exposes the polysemical nature of the word *signum*, which in Augustine's doctrine results in typologies based both on the origin of meaning and on the kind of relationship to its referents. The first one posits a differentiation between: (a) the immediate, empirical or referential senses of words, (b) the intentional and figurative meaning with which humans convey their abstract emotions, sensations or ideas, and (c) the hidden or symbolic meaning bestowed by God and expressed in the Scriptures by his intermediaries (Chydenius 1975, 322). As Strubel has demonstrated, this distribution places indirect meaning —figurative or symbolic— in two different dimensions: firstly, as in (b) above, at a tropological level which consists “dans l'expression indirecte de la vérité cachée, par les moyens du langage”, and secondly, as in (c), on an extralinguistic plane where the sense “s'accomplit tout entier au niveau des référents . . . se situe dans un au-delà du discours dont seule la théologie peut ou prétend rendre compte” (1975, 344).

St Augustine, however, distinguishes only two possible links between meaning and referent: processes where there exists a direct connection between them (*signa propria*), and processes where the usual meaning is deferred to cover another referent (*De doctrina christiana* 2:10.15):

Sunt autem signa vel propria vel translata. Propria dicuntur cum his rebus significandis adhibentur, propter quas sunt instituta . . . Translata sunt, cum et ipsae res, quas propriis verbis significandum usurpantur. (Augustine, vol. 15, 109-10)

[Now signs are either literal (*propria*) or transferred (*translata*). They are called literal when they are employed to designate those things on account of which they are instituted . . . Transferred signs occur when that which we signify by literal words is adopted to signify something else.]

It is clear that Augustine's theory of signs is not symmetrical, since both *signa data* and *signa divinitus data* are types of transferred signs (*translata*) and there is no specific plane at the level of reference which includes the tropological figurative meaning. I believe that behind these typologies lies an implicit contrast between verbal and factual allegory:

the rhetorical or linguistic manner of expressing symbolic meaning and the decoding of hidden meaning at the levels of reference and exegesis. Moreover, the latter is always privileged in his system due to the theological description of meaning as a pre-existent entity which humans may already have known due to God's grace. As Strubel points out when he discusses Augustine's semiotics of allegory:

Le plus remarquable dans cette nomenclature, c'est que les *signa translata* s'opposent directement aux *signa propria*, le symbolisme extra-linguistique des référents au pur phénomène de signification, ce qui élude la question du sens "figuré" inhérent au discours (le niveau des tropes ou de la symbolisation au premier degré), puisque le terme le plus proche de la notion de "figuré" telle que la comprend la rhétorique, le "sens transposé", est réservé au symbolisme des faits, et ne concerne pas les mots. (1975, 345)<sup>7</sup>

It seems, therefore, that early Christian exegesis was unable to distinguish between "propositional" and "lexical" symbolism, or to approach the whole phenomenon as a "fait de langage", to use the labels proposed by Todorov (1974-75, 114). An exception to this attitude may be ascertained in the works of two important Anglo-Saxon scholars: Alcuin (732-804) and Bede (672/673-735).

Although the main rhetorical work of Alcuin —*Disputatio de rhetorica et de virtutibus* (794)— was produced in France and its ultimate influence is traced in the Continent rather than in Anglo-Saxon England (Murphy 1974, 81-82), his standpoint is an interesting attempt to distinguish the factual from the verbal allegory. In the *Disputatio* he appreciates the potential of language for representing and simulating all the categories of human thought; however, he admits the impossibility of

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<sup>7</sup> The distinction, borrowed by Augustine from Origen's *De principiis* (book IV), of three different approaches to the interpretation of Scriptures —the literal, the allegorical and the typological— does neither overlap with the two classifications of signs nor render unequivocally the classical sense of allegory as an expressive figure *per immutationem*. Both allegory and typology are hermeneutic tools applied to decoding the symbolically loaded texts of the Bible. In the case of the former, what is signified by a statement becomes the signifier of another meaning which requires a knowledge of theological discourse to be recovered. In the case of the latter, the extralinguistic referent, based on sacred history (Old Testament), constitutes a new sign which indicates events in subsequent sacred history (New Testament), so that the key for its interpretation is contained within its own discourse (Irvine 1987, 57-59).

cognition and speech to grasp and express divine truth. This results in the symbolic treatment of words, in order that through allegory they can state “spiritual things by means of physical things, or future things by means of present or past things, or interior things by means of exterior things” (Bolton 1978, 17-20). Therefore, Alcuin’s approach is based on verbal or lexical rather than on factual symbolism; this idea is reinforced when he points out that it is in the text itself that the reader finds indications of whether to accept a literal meaning or search for allegory.

The dependence of Bede’s *De schematibus et tropis sacrae scripturae liber* (691-703) on the classical Roman paradigm, particularly Quintilian’s *Institutio oratoria* and Donatus’ *Barbarismus* (book III of *Ars maiora*), leads him to differentiate clearly between allegory as trope and as exegetical device. In section 12 of chapter II he splits the definition of allegory —“tropus quo aliud significatur quam dicitur” (Migne 1866, vol. 90, 184)— into the well-known categories of *allegoria quae factis fit* and *allegoria quae verbis fit*: “Notandum quod allegoria aliquando factis, aliquando verbis tantummodo” (Migne 1866, vol. 90, 185). [One should certainly notice that allegory is sometimes factual, sometimes verbal only (Tannenhaus 1962, 249).] The analysis of several passages from the Bible —Genesis 37, 49; Isaiah 11, Zechariah 11, I Samuel 16, and others— clarifies the distinction between allegory as a model of scriptural writing based on the symbolical extension of historical events from the Old to the New Testament, and allegory as a type of verbal or descriptive symbolism which is widely used in all genres to promote a deeper comprehension of the text (Chydenius 1975, 329). The consequences are, firstly, the possibility of extending the allegorical mode to secular poetry, which is then defined as *allegoria quae verbis fit* and which occasionally functions as an extended metaphor with a symbolically descriptive aim;<sup>8</sup> secondly, it helps to separate two methods of allegorical interpretation. Strubel attempts to characterize them by contrasting the special relationship between signifier, signified and referent which each hermeneutic procedure unchains. *Allegoria quae factis fit* serves as “un processus qui fait d’un événement historique réel (referent 1) le symbole d’un autre événement (referent 2)” (1975, 349). However, the connection

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<sup>8</sup> This functional specialization is sanctioned by Isidore’s in *Etymologiae* (VIII.7), on which Bede’s *De schematibus et tropis* also relied; the former admitted the role of poets as composers of fictions of speech “obliquis, figurationibus cum decore aliquo” [obliquely, figuratively and with a certain beauty].



between both referents is not metaphorical, but direct, as that which links signifier to signified in normal discourse. Nevertheless, this type of allegory implies a chronological correlation between the sign and the two referents which does not usually apply in natural communication. This process of interpretation may be represented graphically as follows (1975, 350):

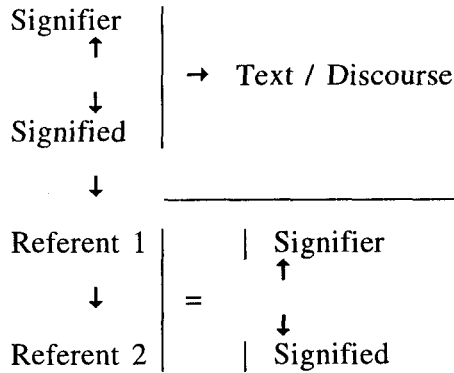


Fig. 1

*Allegoria quae verbis fit* is not restricted to Biblical exegesis but pertains to the symbolism of poetry: the extended metaphor which functions at the imaginary level. The connection between each referent and its signified is metaphorical, but does not depend on physical similarity; rather, it is “une ressemblance fictive et contingente, résultat de l’imagination humaine” (1975, 351). This is the graphic representation which Strubel proposes (1975, 351):

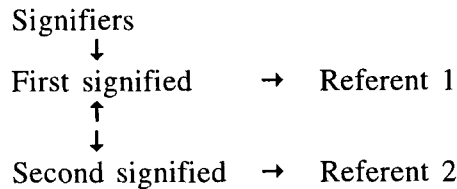


Fig. 2

That late Anglo-Saxon poets might have been familiar with these hermeneutic principles and applied them to their practice has been convincingly argued by Campbell (1966). He argues that the authors who

produced the extant corpus of Old English literature had most probably had a Latin education, which can be inferred from Bede and Alcuin to have consisted mainly of a thorough study of *grammatica* and *rhetorica*. Thus, any Anglo-Saxon poet who could read Latin at all would also have been instructed in the figures of speech and “would inevitably use his knowledge when constructing and assembling his half-lines . . . [so that] age-old formulas could easily find themselves embedded in sophisticated poetic structures learned from Latin rhetoricians” (1966, 192). Moreover, the extension of patristic semiotics in Anglo-Saxon England and the comprehension of the theories of its national representatives —at least Bede’s— might have led tenth-century poets, such as *The Seafarer*’s, to create fictive or imaginary situations which might illustrate the tenets of Christian faith.

In view of these ideas it must be accepted that the first part of *The Seafarer* functions as an extended symbol which aims to exemplify the doctrines exhibited in the second part; however, it can never be appreciated as factual or structurally perfect allegory, but as *allegoria quae verbis fit*, mainly because the former was suitable only for biblical exegesis. At the level of production, therefore, the allegory of the poem works as an extended trope to create a fictitious situation metaphorically; at the level of reception, the interpretation of the images in lines 4-64 is built on the hermeneutic addition of another signified and its referent to the ones literally attributed to the textual signifiers, as represented in figure 2. This explanation may account for the validity of both the literal and the allegorical interpretations, and may lie behind the widespread, but impressionistic, notion that “the Anglo-Saxons treated allegory in a manner which revealed a relation of fact to figure so close that the figure was an inseparable aspect of the fact” (Stanley 1956, 453). Rather than two detachable facets, the literal and the allegorical should be regarded in the poem as the gradual stages involved both in the processes of production and reception of symbolic meaning. Only with this perspective in mind can the implications which escape a literal reading be grasped, the lack of textual foundation which encroaches upon some allegorical readings be avoided and, finally, the whole dimension of the poem’s art be appreciated.

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