

Life Writing Symposium

Autobiographical Mirrors: Old English elegies as narrative 'un-memoirs'

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In this paper, I will analyse two Old English elegies - *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer* – and suggest that they are medieval examples of dramatic 'non-biographies', or narrative 'un-memoirs'. Our tendency, as modern readers in Australia, can be to view first-person, introspective, personal narratives as autobiographies; thus, we can apply life-writing theory to our readings of such early poetry and be satisfied with our 'modern' interpretations. I will begin my study with a brief attempt to fit these Old English elegies into a life narrative 'theoretical' mould. There is certainly a sense of the autobiographical narrative in these works: in *The Wanderer*, the narrator positions himself in the 'present' and looks to his past, evidenced as the narrative "I" oscillates from first- to third-person (the "I" then vs. the "I" now) and, as autobiographical conventions require, as the two "I"s merge into a single, retrospective voice by the end of the poem.

While these poems contain elements that are uncannily similar to conventions of autobiography, I will discuss the notion that such similarities are not necessarily relevant to Anglo-Saxon culture, but instead are potentially revelatory in regards to Australian cultural reading and writing practices. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson explain that "'autobiography' celebrates the autonomous individual and the universalizing life story. Its theorists have installed this master narrative of "the sovereign self" as an institution of literature and culture..."¹ Similarly, Jerome Bruner draws attention to the 'turning point' in Western autobiographies as being "crucial to the effort to *individualize* a life, to make it clearly and patently something more than a running off of automatic, folk-psychological canonicity."² It is this desire to establish a sense of the 'individual' that, I will argue, can

¹ Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minneapolis Press, 2001), p.3.

² Jerome Bruner, 'Self-making and world-making', in *Narrative and Identity: Studies in Autobiography, Self and Culture*, ed. by Jens Brockmeier and Donal Carbaugh, *Studies in Narrative*, vol.1, (Amsterdam, Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company), 25-38, pp.31-32.

make interpreting these elegies as autobiographies appealing to modern Australian readers; however, it is the lack of individualism that separates these medieval poems from the genre of autobiography.

I will argue that the poems' 'narrators' would not have been autonomous individuals (and I think that close reading of these works will demonstrate how reliant they are on Germanic cultural expectations) and that their stories, while conventional for the Anglo-Saxon period, are not 'universalizing' life stories. A parallel example, dealing with issues of individuality in ancient Greek writing, is enlightening if applied to the Anglo-Saxon works in question:

Instead of telling narratives of events, thoughts, and intentions which were specifically personal and private, the main concern of the individual [in ancient Greece] was to integrate him- or herself in what was regarded as the natural community of Greek culture. Only as homogeneously fused with this community and its synthesis in the system of myths could the Greek individual think of his or her existence. Rather than emphasizing the "standing out" of a singular mind or personality, the Greek sense of self was deeply embedded in a cultural whole, in a socially and naturally given context of being... Consequently, we find neither a distinct autobiographical genre nor a particular discursive place or event in which a Greek would have thought it appropriate to report his or her personal memories or tell a life story – except for a few extraordinary situations of "self-disclosure" such as in first-person narratives addressed to strangers...³

We are presented with first-person laments in both *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*, written from the point of view of exiled warriors, separated from both community and kin. As is evident in the Greek model, I suggest that the Anglo-Saxon individual's sense of self would also have been "deeply embedded in a cultural whole" and that we are not likely being presented with a person's "life story" in either work. Although there is no evidence to the contrary, one cannot assume that these poems are observations of reality, nor can they confidently be viewed as the non-fictional musings of an Anglo-Saxon writer. Paul de Man considers autobiography to be "the exemplary case of prosopopeia, or the representation of an imaginary or absent person as speaking and acting." While it is arguable that de Man intended this statement to be taken literally instead of metaphorically, it is in a literal capacity that this statement is most relevant for

³ Mark Freeman and Jens Brockmeier, 'Narrative integrity: Autobiographical identity and the meaning of the "good life"', in *Narrative and Identity: Studies in Autobiography, Self and Culture*, ed. by Jens Brockmeier and Donal Carbaugh, *Studies in Narrative*, vol.1, (Amsterdam, Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company), 75-99, p.78.

my study. The speakers in *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer* are, I will argue, just such representations of people; to my mind, they are undoubtedly both absent *and* imaginary, and serve as representations of Anglo-Saxon ideals.

So why is it tempting for us to view these narratives through the lens of life narrative theory? Why is it appealing to assume that the narrator is a 'real' person searching for a sense of individual identity? A notable 'turning point' in the elegies, as described by Bruner above, is the act of exile: the speakers are exiled from their kin and territory, and have embarked on quests to regain a sense of their old lives. They are forced to look to the past, to their heritage, and must come to terms with the distance (both physical and emotional) that separates them from their former communities. These are individuals who resent being 'autonomous'; what we are presented with here are conventional figures in Old English literature, in that they are conspicuously aware of the need to be part of the larger picture, and that are consequently unsettled by the notion of exclusion.

Bruner observes that we "are simply mirrors of our culture. To assure individuality (and I am speaking of Western culture only), we focus upon what, in the light of some folk psychology, is exceptional (and, therefore, worthy of telling) in our lives."⁴ I would like to suggest that depictions of the state of exile are "exceptional" – but familiar – and are therefore keys to establishing cultural identity, in the Anglo-Saxon works, as well as in Australian contexts. Reading these specific examples of medieval literature, then, as autobiography, is of particular interest because in doing so, we hold a mirror up to reflect contemporary Australian concerns. Perhaps this 'autobiographical mirror' reveals that, for Australian readers, the appeal of the elegies, and the appeal of interpreting them as autobiographies, may lay in the familiarity of the subject matter; they are exile narratives, written in a dramatic 'memoir' style, by characters that seem to be searching for a sense of identity. Parallels will be drawn between these elegies and contemporary Australian 'exile' narratives in order to further explore issues of communal and individual identity, in both sets of literature.

⁴ Bruner, p.30.