

EALD IS ? ES EORÎ SELE, EAL IC EOM OFLONGAD:
PSYCHOLOGY, SPACE / TIME AND ECOLOGY
IN *THE WIFE'S LAMENT*

1. PRELIMINARY WORDS

If we consider any given poetic text through the practical bases of the last analytical level of the theoretical triad of Literary Anthropology¹, we are finally faced with a series of parametres which are responsible for the building of the *Weltanschauung* hidden in the text. If the revised text is *The Wife's Lament* -one of the most relevant extant poems belonging to the Old English elegiac discourse-, after a carefull abstraction of its (para)linguistic rituals and symbols², it could be said that its thought-world spins around the three parametres we intend to describe in the present article: Psychology, Space/Time and Ecology.

2. THE PERSONAL/PSYCHOLOGICALEXPRESSION

Considering the text as a whole, the personal/psychological expression stated in the poem is highly important, being one of its most relevant thematic parametres. We find a female poetic narrator -as it happened to be the case with *Wulf and Eadwacer*- who, from the very beginning of the poem, wants

¹ To enhance any theoretical/practical aspect of Literary Anthropology the reading of our previous analysis (specially 1996, 1997 & forthcoming c) is recommended. The bibliographical references listed there are also very useful.

² *The Wife's Lament* receives a full literary anthropological treatment in the fifth chapter of a forthcoming volume (University of Vigo Press). This volume presents the definitive results of the research that we have been carrying out during the last three years. Partial excerpts of these results have been offered in several articles (Bueno forthcoming a, b & c) whose reading is recommended. For preliminary results of *The Wife's Lament* Bueno 1998: 344-390 can also be consulted.

us to perceive that the expression of her mental distress, of her suffering, constitutes the thematic core of her poetic discourse:

<i>Ic</i> pis giedd wrece	bi <i>me</i> ful geomorre,
<i>minre</i> sylfre síl.	<i>Ic</i> pæt secgan mæg,
hwæt <i>ic</i> yrmpa gebad,	sippan <i>ic</i> up weox,
niwes oppe ealdes,	no ma ponne nu.
A <i>ic</i> wite wonn	<i>minra</i> wræcsipa. ¹ (1-5)

These first five lines have an introductory character² as a way of presenting the topic which builds the text (Greenfield 1969: 166, Strauss 1981: 270-272). The personal character of both the psychological expression and the misfortunes which are going to be presented is set clear from the very beginning if we consider how the personal pronoun is used in these lines. Repetition of first person singular pronominal forms -shown in bold type in the previous quotation- does not happen at random. They mark the personal intention of the narrated discourse. From the first lines in which a psychological description is made -"geomorre", "síl", "yrmpa", "wite", "wonn"-, the female narrator is setting the boundaries of her discourse, establishing a personal/psychological background for its development. Thus, from a reflection on her own present sadness -and having warned us about the *presentness* ("niwes", "nu") and the *pastness* ("ealdes") of the misfortunes of her ongoing narration-, she thinks about her past personal sufferings in the lines following the introduction:

Ærest min hlaforð gewat heonan of leodum
ofer ypa gelac; hæfde ic uhtceare
hwær min leodfruma londes wære.

¹ Trans: "I sing this song about myself, full sad./My own distress, and tell what hardships I/Have had to suffer since I first grew up./Present and Past, but never more than now;/I ever suffered grief through banishment (Hamer 1970: 73)". All the translations offered in this article are Robert Hamer's. If it is not indicated otherwise all subsequent translations come also from Hamer's edition. The Anglo-Saxon text have been always taken from Krapp & Dobbie's edition (1936: 210-211)

² Devoting the first lines to develop a short introduction of the themes of the poem is a well known poetic tool which appears very frequently in Anglo-Saxon poetry. Karl Wentersdorf (1981: 493-494) points out many cases of this usage: *The Battle of Brunanburh*, *The Fates of the Apostles*, *Vainglory*, and *The Wanderer*. In the Germanic tradition *Hildebrandslied* is also quoted as an example.

Îa ic me feran gewat	folgaÎ secan,
wineleas wræcca,	for minre weapearfe.
Ongunnon pæt pæs monnes	magas hycgan
purh dyrne gepoht,	pæt hy todælden unc,
pæt wit gewidost	in woruldrice
lifdon lallicost,	ond mec longade.
Het mec hlaford min	herheard niman,
ahte ic leofra lyt	on pissum londstede,
holdra freonda.	Forpon is min hyge geomor,
Îa ic me ful gemæcne	monnan funde,
heardsæligne,	hygegeomorne,
mod mipendne,	morpor hycgendne.
Blipe gebæro	ful oft wit beotedan
pæt unc ne gedælde	nemne deaÎ ana
owiht elles;	eft is pæt onhworfen,
is nu * * *	swa hit no wære
freondscipe uncer.	Sceal ic feor ge neah
mines felaleofan	fæhfu dreogan.
Heht mec mon wunian	on wuda bearwe,
under actreo	in pam eorÎscræfe. ¹ (6-28)

As these lines show, the female narrator basically chooses an almost exclusively psychological point of view to describe her past remembrances. The narrated facts are described as long as they cause mental distress and suffering to her, and to express that is the key point of her poetic discourse. So, her husband's exile worries her -"uhtceare"-, her own departure is also distressing -"wineleas wræcca, for minre weapearfe"-, the plans that have been set to bring them apart are also responsible for her suffering -"lifdon

¹ Trans: "For since my lord departed from this people/Over the sea, each dawn have I had care/Wondering where my lord may be on land./When I set off to join and serve my lord./A friendless exile in my sorry plight./My husband's kinsmen plotted secretly/How they might separate us from each other/That we might live in wretchedness apart/Most widely in the world: and my heart longed./In the first place my lord ordered me/To take up my abode here, though I had/Among these people few dear loyal friends;/Therefore my heart is sad. Then had I found/A fitting man, but one ill-starred, distressed./Whose hiding heart was contemplating crime./Though cheerful his demeanor. We had vowed/Full many a time that nought should come between us/But death alone, and nothing else at all./All that has changed, and it is now as though/Our marriage and our love had never been./And far or near forever I must suffer /The feud of my beloved husband dear./So in this forest grove they made me dwell./Under the oak-tree, in this earthly barrow (*op. cit.*: pp. 73, 75)".

laðlicost, ond mec longade"-, and all the following situation is giving us a past context in which the female poetic narrator has suffered from mental and psychological distress that has saddened her -"Forpon is min hyge geomor"-. The past facts described through psychological means lay increasing emphasis on the narrator's mental state, emphasis which keeps on increasing in the following lines, when we go back to present time:

Eald is pes eorðsele,	eal ic eom oflongad,
sindon dena dimme,	duna uphea,
bitre burgtunas,	brerum beweaxne,
wic wylna leas.	Ful oft mec her wrape begeat
fromsþ frean.	Frynd sind on eorpan,
lofe lifgende,	leger weardiaf,
ponne ic on uhtan	ana gonge
under actreo	geond pas eorðscrafu.
? ær ic sittan mot	sumorlangne dæg,
pær ic wepan mæg	mine wræcsþas,
earfopa fela;	forpon ic æfre ne mæg
pære modceare	minre gerestan,
ne ealles pæs longapes pe mec on pissum life begeat. ¹ (29-42)	

In the natural environment in which she has been forced to live -whose thematic connotations will be dealt with later on-, the poetic narrator insists on expressing her present anguish. The loneliness she lives in, the remembrance of her loved one, her longing state, make her present situation a distressing moment. That is why she suffers, and through that psychological expression she shares her suffering with us. In the following lines there is a small change of tone which adds an element that has already appeared in other poems (Bueno 1997, Bueno forthcoming b & c): extrapolation/universality.

¹ Trans: "Old is this earth-cave, all I do is yearn./The dales are dark with high hills up above./Sharp hedge surrounds it, overgrown with briars./And joyless is the place. Full often here/The absence of my lord comes sharply to me./Dear lovers in this world lie in their beds./While I alone at crack of dawn must walk/Under the oak-tree round this earthly cave./Where I must stay the length of summer days./Where I may weep my banishment and all/My many hardships, for I never can/Contrive to set at rest my careworn heart./Nor all the longing that this life has brought me (*op. cit.*: p. 75)".

A scyle geong mon	wesan geomormod,
heard heortan gepoht,	swylce habban sceal
blipe gebæro,	eac pon breostceare,
sinsorgna gedreag,	sy æt him sylfum gelong
eal his worulde wyn,	sy ful wide fah
feorres folclondes,	pæt min freond sitef
under stanhlipe	storme behrimed,
wine werigmod,	wætre befloweren
on dreorsele.	Dreogeþ se min wine
micle modceare;	he gemon to oft
wynlicran wic.	Wa biþ pam pe sceal
of langope	leofes abidan. ¹ (42-53)

At the beginning of these lines the narrator moves away from her individuality to make a general philosophical statement. Thus, she informs the young men about the importance of having a very strong character to positively endure -"blipe gebæro"- sufferings and misfortunes of all kind when they appear. From a position of knowledge -as she has described her own feelings-, she warns us that anyone can be subject to pain, that the narrated feelings can be shared by anyone, either contemporary hearers or present day readers. After describing -also from a psychological viewpoint- her husband's distress in his exile dwelling (46b-52a), the poem ends with the same philosophical tone as these final excerpt began: "Wa biþ pam pe sceal/of langope leofes abidan". That is to say, all the things we have been told by the female narrator can be shared by all those who are in her state. The universality of this poetic discourse is -in our opinion- one of the main reasons for our present interest in the poem.

The emphasis set on her mental state -and on her husband's in the last lines-, the extreme density of the narrated emotions or the psychological expression of the reactions to those emotions, clearly reveal that the personal/psychological expression is the basic thematic parametre of *The Wife's*

¹ Trans: "A young man always must be serious./And tough his character; like wise he should/Seem cheerful, even though his heart is sad/With multitude of cares. All earthly joy/Must come from his own self. Since my dear lord/Is outcast, far off in a distant land./Frozen by storms beneath a stormy cliff/And dwelling in some desolate abode/Beside the sea, my weary-hearted lord/Must suffer pitiless anxiety./And all too often he will call to mind/A happier dwelling. Grief must always be/For him who yearning longs for his beloved (*op. cit.:* p. 75)".

Lament, and interacts as such with the other two we have found, binding thus the poem's conceptual world.

3. SPACE / TIME: DISTANCE, MENTAL JOURNEY AND EVERLASTING PRESENT

The space/time perceptions obtained in *The Wife's Lament* compose a very interesting parametre because both concepts are perfectly inserted within the thematic structure of the poem and interact with the rest of its existing parametres.

As far as the space concept is concerned, we can talk about a double real/metaphorical perspective, just as the one found in *The Seafarer*, although less marked. The real perspective is more directly observed in the text, and it shows greater thematic relevance. All through the poem, there is a constant insistence on expressing a certain sense of physical separation of both lovers, caused by two real journeys: the husband's seafaring -"Ærest min hlaford gewat heonan of leodum/ofere ƿpa gelac (6-7)"¹, a classical paradigmatic exile topic, and the wife's journey on his search -"Îa ic me feran gewat folgað secan (9)"². The dread of separation has always been present in the female narrator's mind, and has been responsible for a good deal of her distressing state:

Ongunnon ƿæt ƿæs monnes	magas hycgan
ƿurh dyrne gepoht,	ƿæt hy todælden unc,
ƿæt wit gewidost	in woruldrice
lifdon laðlicost,	ond mec longade. ³ (11-14)

When physical separation has already taken place, we can say that anguish and grief come as a result from their being apart, hence the important connection between space and psychology.⁴ In fact, when the female

¹ Trans: "For since my lord departed from this people/Over the sea (*op. cit.*: p. 73)".

² Trans: "When I set off to serve and join my lord (*op. cit.*: p. 73)".

³ Trans: "My husband's kinsmen plotted secretly/How they might separate us from each other/That we might live in wretchedness apart/Most widely in the world: and my heart longed (*op. cit.*: p. 73)".

⁴ Note that in *Wulf and Eadwacer* this space/psychological connection also took place (Bueno forthcoming c). Another example of this connection appears in the Old Norse poem *Helreið Brynhildar* (Renoir 1977: 4)

narrator is talking from the loneliness of her new natural background, one of the things that distress her mostly is the memory of such absence, of their not being together: "Ful oft mec her wrape begeat / fromsip frean (32b-33a)".¹

Thus, the distressing mental state results directly from the separation both from her husband and from the rest of human beings, because she is without her "hlaford/felaleofan" and "wineleas", that is, without friends, with no people who can relieve her isolation and her anxiety. The use of dual pronouns "unc" (12, 22), "uncer" (25) and "wit" (13, 21) is reinforcing the feeling of closeness, of the spacial/spiritual union that exists between the narrator and her husband, and emphasizing the painful separation of something so strongly joined (Renoir; 1977: 15). Here is where the metaphorical perspective appears, the journey carried out through memory with the mind when remembering her husband and the time passed with him (Green;1983: 128), a remembrance of past happiness which is often strengthened when contrasted with her present anguish (32b-33a). The imagination serves the poetic narrator as a powerful loophole from her natural isolation, not only by remembering her husband's absence and the past happier times but also by imagining her husband's present sufferings in the icy places depicted at the end of the poem. He is also using the mind to remember happier dwellings-"he gemon to oft/wynlicran wic (51b-52a)"-.² Thus, both perspectives are combined in one single thematic aim establishing a very clear connection between space and psychology, because it is the separation what causes and modulates her suffering and her mental/psychological distress, expressed all through the poem.

The time perception in *The Wife's Lament* is built around a contextual present -a given "now", a "nu"- from which several past references are made. However, it is in the present circumstances where the text lays its emphasis (1-5, 29-53), from the very beginning:

Ic pis giedd wrece	bi me ful geomorre,
minre sylfre sí.	Ic pæt secgan mæg,
hwæt ic ympan gebad,	sippan ic up weox,
niwes oppe ealdes,	no ma ponne nu.

¹ Trans: "Full often here/The absence of my lord comes sharply to me (*op. cit.*: p. 75)".

² Trans: "And all too often he will call to mind/A happier dwelling (*op. cit.*: p. 75)".

A ic wite wonn minra wræcsipa.¹ (1-5)

It is true that several past deeds are told (6-28), as they are highly interesting to express the reasons for present suffering -so both temporal perspectives are combined-, but, although "niwes oppe ealdes" sufferings are narrated, it is the present psychological expression -the "nu"- what draws the narrator's attention, because her suffering has never been greater than at the present moment. Even in the middle of the past narration the present psychological expression is mentioned -"Forpon is min hyge geomor (17b)"-. That insistence on the present, on the expression of current anguish, seems to be a negation of the future, and on the ongoing verses some critics (Green 1983: 125-129) have placed the female narrator trapped in a sort of "everlasting present":

? ær ic sittan mot sumorlangne dæg,
pær ic wepan mæg mine wræcsipas,
earfopa fela; forpon ic æfre ne mæg
pære modceare minre gerestan,
ne ealles pæs longapes pe mec on pissum life begeat.² (37-41)

It seems that the days are repeating this neverending cycle, that there is nothing but more long summer days in which to keep on being lonely sat to remember past sufferings. In this sense, *The Wife's Lament* presents a basically present time perception, which emphasizes the closeness of expressed deeds and provides an easier and faster identification with the feelings transmitted. We think that the interaction between psychology and space (distance as a cause for suffering, hence the importance of the psychological expression) / time (present, as it is the background for the psychological expression) perceptions is a very clear fact, which contributes to the building of the conceptual world of the poem.

¹ Trans: "I sing this song about myself, full sad./My own distress, and tell what hardships I/Have had to suffer since I first grew up./Present and Past, but never more than now;/I ever suffered grief through banishment (op. cit: p. 73)".

² Trans: "Where I must stay the length of summer days./Where I may weep my banishment and all/My many hardships, for I never can/Contrive to set at rest my careworn heart./Nor all the longing that this life has brought me (op. cit.: p. 75)".

4. ECOLOGY: NATURE AS BACKGROUND

The natural element plays an important role as a background for the psychological expression narrated in the poem, interacting with the other parameters that build the conceptual world of *The Wife's Lament*. There are two moments -both framed within the present-time part of the text (29-53)- in which this is very clearly seen. The first one covers the part in which the poetic narrator thinks about her present emotional situation (29-41), totally placing her psychological expression in a very precisely depicted natural atmosphere:

Heht mec mon wunian	on wuda <i>bearwe</i> ,
under <i>actreo</i>	in pam <i>eorlscrafe</i> .
Eald is pes <i>eorlsele</i> ,	eal ic eom <u>oflongad</u> ,
sindon <i>dena</i> dimme,	<i>duna</i> uphea,
bitre burgtunas,	<i>brerum</i> beweaxne,
<u>wic wynna leas</u> .	Ful oft mec her <u>wrape</u> begeat
fromsþ frean.	Frynd sind on <i>eorpan</i> ,
leofe lifgende,	leger weardiaġ,
ponne ic on uhtan	<u>ana</u> gonge
under <i>actreo</i>	geond pas <i>eorlscrafu</i> .
? ær ic sittan mot	sumorlangne dæg,
pær ic <u>wepan</u> mæg	<u>mine wræcsipas</u> .
<u>earfopa fela</u> ;	forpon ic æfre ne mæg
pære <u>modceare</u>	minre <u>gerestan</u> ,
ne ealles pæs <u>longapes</u>	pe mec on pissum life begeat. ¹ (27-41)

The detailed physical definition of the place, of the natural background, is by no means unconscious, bearing in mind the great amount of terms -shown in bold type- used to describe the environment. In a process of particularization carried out through the text, the poetic narrator moves from the general -

¹ Trans: "So in this forest grove they made me dwell./Under the oak-tree, in this earthly barrow./Old is this earth-cave, all I do is yearn./The dales are dark with high hills up above./Sharp hedge surrounds it, overgrown with briars./And joyless is the place. Full often here/The absence of my lord comes sharply to me./Dear lovers in this world lie in their beds./While I alone at crack of dawn must walk/Under the oak-tree round this earthly cave./Where I must stay the length of summer days./Where I may weep my banishment and all/My many hardships, for I never can/Contrive to set at rest my careworn heart./Nor all the longing that this life has brought to me (*op. cit.*: p. 75)".

"on wuda bearwe"- to the particular -"actreo", "eorfscraefe", "eorfsele"-, clearly stating the place as she states the expression of her feelings explicitly. Many terms for the psychological expression appear in the quoted excerpt - underlined-, connecting thus nature with psychology. In the woods, in that very cave in which she lives¹, the poetic narrator reveals her thoughts to us, and every descriptive element of nature is linked with its psychological correlate. Thus, it could be said that the protective environment provided by nature, conditions, worsens, and makes real the narrator's state of mind, because terms such as "dimme" and "brerum bewaxne" characterize the background and describe metaphorically the narrator's mental distress (Green 1983: 125).

The second moment is placed at the final lines of the text, when the poetic narrator depicts in her mind the unfavourable natural environment her husband has arrived to by sea:

	sy ful wide fah
feorres folclondes,	pæt min freond sitef
under stanhlīpe	storme behrimed,
wine werigmod,	wætre beflowen
on dreorsele.	Dreogef se min wine
micle modceare;	he gemon to oft
wynlicran wic. ²	(46b-52a)

The narrator gives us the traditional wintry germanic *locus*, both adverse and icy, as the natural background for her exiled husband in a distant land - "fah feorres folclondes"-. As it happened before, this natural background helps to increase her husband's sufferings. Thus, in this cold unfavourable environment - "under stanhlīpe storme behrimed"- her husband expresses his

¹ Some critics have been very worried about discovering the exact meanings of the terms "actreo", "eorfscraefe" or "eorfsele". Emily Jensen (1990) and Joseph Harris (1977) have devoted some articles to discuss it and Karl Wentersdorf (1981) offered a very good summary of the basic meanings given to these terms and their connections with sanctuaries, caves, places for shelter, etc. All of them quote Tacitus' descriptions in *Germania* of several underground buildings used by the Germanic tribes as places for storage and/or shelter.

² Trad: "Since my dear lord/Is outcast, far off in a distant land./Frozen by storms beneath a stormy cliff/And dwelling in some desolate abode/Beside the sea, my weary-hearted lord/Must suffer pitiless anxiety./And all too often he will call to mind/A happier dwelling (*op. cit.*: p. 75)".

psychological distress, his grief -"Dreogel se min wine/micle modceare"-, and tries to remember happier places using his mind as we saw before. After seeing this, we can conclude that the natural environment in *The Wife's Lament* appears as a background for the narrator's psychological expression - and for her husband's, through her-, increasing and conditioning such expression. We believe that the interaction between the different parameters that build the thought-world of the poem -psychology, space/time and ecology- has been more than evident.

5. CONCLUSION

As it happens with almost every Anglo-Saxon elegiac poem, the interpretative difficulty of some of their parts has forced the critics to offer a wide variety of readings and interpretations. *The Wife's Lament* is also a good example of this feature, and there have been many opinions about the narrator's character -male/female, despite being this fully established up to now, there are some differing voices-, the speaker who acts in the poetic discourse -if it is a woman with one, two or three different men-, the good or bad behaviour of the husband towards his wife, the kind of building hidden under the terms "actreo", "eorfscræfe", "eorfsele", or the possible Christian allegoric condition of the poem¹. As it happened with other elegies too -i.e. *Wulf and Eadwacer*-, searching for sources of the original story is a very difficult task, and in most occasions the allocation of a given source is a matter of unprovable guesswork until the mentioned texts appear². In the end, following Jane Curry's words (1966: 189), "we are forced back to the poem". The analysis of the conceptual world in *The Wife's Lament* has shown us its building parameters, and has stated the importance of the psychological expression for its understanding. This eminently personal-featured psychological expression is

¹ Jane L. Curry (1966) and Lee Ann Johnson (1971) offer very good summaries of all these interpretations. We refer the reader to both articles for full bibliographic references. For a vast majority of critics, some of these views -specially the christian/allegoric one- are somewhat biased, because they look for excessive complexity in a text that is not so complex in our opinion. We think that this complexity-to-be-found distract the critics from what the text really offers. (Curry 1966: 187).

² It is true that there are many analogue texts for *The Wife's Lament*. Stanley Greenfield (1969: 165), Jane L. Curry (1966) and Dorothy Bray (1995) revise those most frequently used by critics. However, there are cases in which critics hazard a connection with a text that has as many differences as points in common, hence the extreme difficulty of using not very clear sources to build textual interpretations.

the central point of the text, always in interaction with the other two parameters: space/time and ecology.

Everything in the text is placed to make us see the expression of the narrator's distress, feelings, and sufferings, as something that forms part of human experience. The prominent thematic centre in *The Wife's Lament* is the expression of several personal emotions, which could be universally shared - by means of our swift identification with them- by those who face the text. We do not deny the existence of other provable interpretations and/or meanings, but it is equally undeniable -if you follow what has been exposed in this article- that these three parameters, with the psychological one playing the leading role, are the most directly inferable from the text and the responsible for the building of its conceptual world.

Curiously enough, some critics (e.g. Green 1983: 125-126, Jensen 1990: 453) have pointed out that the paratactic structure of line 29 -Eald is pes eorísele, eal ic eom oflongad- would combine the age of the cave (Nature/-Ecology) with the deep intensity of the narrator's suffering (Psychological Expression) and the space/time span of both. So, in one single line we are faced with the three parameters which build the thought-world of this text, according to the interpretation herein stated. This peculiar fact encourages us even more to keep on considering them as the three thematic bases upon which *The Wife's Lament* offers -and had been offering since it was first sung- its poetic *weltanschauung* to those who cared about reading or hearing the everlasting beauty of its lines.

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