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**Native Foreigners: Migrating Seabirds and the Pelagic Soul in The Seafarer**

This indoors flying makes it seem absurd,

Although it itches and nags and flutters and yearns,

To postulate any other life than now.[[1]](#footnote-1)

(Louis MacNeice, “Dark Age Glosses”, 15-17)

Þisses fugles gecynd fela gelices

This bird’s kind [is] much like …[[2]](#footnote-2)

(*The Phoenix*, 387b)

Louis MacNeice’s poem reminds us of how well endures one specific association of a very well-known sparrow with a central Anglo-Saxon “image-complex”: fire-lit hall and raging storm, transience and eternity.[[3]](#footnote-3) The purported moment in Bede’s *Historia ecclesiastica* when one king and his people choose a promised Christian eternity after the here and now, rejecting their pagan beliefs, pivots on a fictional augury.[[4]](#footnote-4) Bede’s sparrow is allegorical: like man’s journey from the unknown to human existence on earth, and then again to the unknown, the bird flies in from the cold, through the banqueting hall and back out again into the tempestuous night, subject to the ineluctable transience of mortal life.[[5]](#footnote-5) The *passer*, or *spearwa*, becomes responsible for a seminal moment in the history of the English people, assigned a significant rhetorical function. [[6]](#footnote-6) It resonates with and consolidates a scriptural legacy which designates birds a special status in thinking through this key theological anxiety and inquiry, a legacy which locates birds as ideal creatures to articulate the Christian pilgrim journey by aligning avian flight with the metaphorical peregrinations of the faithful who must “soar to the unchangeable substance of God”.[[7]](#footnote-7) The bird appears in Saint Augustine’s lengthy exegesis of Psalm 83, for instance, where it is compared to the human heart or soul. Psalm 124 includes the *neodspearuwa* “needful sparrow” that Ælfric alludes to elsewhere: *Ute sawl is ahred of grine swa swa spearwa* “Our soul is freed from the snare just like the sparrow”. And in 101 the speaker compares himself directly: *ic spearuwan swa some* / *gelice gewearð, anlicum fugele* “in the same way, I became like the sparrow, solitary bird”.[[8]](#footnote-8) Old English *spearwa*, it seems, was the Anglo-Saxon bird of choice for representing the soul.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Bede’s sparrow usefully introduces us to key elements of the bird-human device at the heart of more than one poem in the Old English Exeter manuscript in which, as my second epigraph from one such poem states, a *fugles gecynd* “bird’s kind” is *fela gelices* “much like”. The poetic strategies of these texts specifically feature birds as metaphorical images for Christian ascension and transformation in profound contemplations envisaging or instructing the longed-for move from here to there. In the most extensive and fully realised version of this analogy, a fantastical bird inhabiting a utopian land twelve fathoms above earth is made an exegetical type for the *hæle hrawerig* “body-weary man” (*Phoenix*, 554a). The allegory overtly couples the bird’s eternal resurrection habits with both Christ and the thronging masses of saved souls who are continuously said to be *swa se fugel* ‘like the bird’ (558a, 585b, 597a).[[10]](#footnote-10) The phoenix is the *anhaga* “lone-dweller” (87a), a bird-human union that the Exeter poets may have picked up from the psalms, particularly in cases where glossed psalters intentionally depict the sparrow as an *anhoga*. [[11]](#footnote-11) I address here the bird-human *anhaga* in another Exeter poem that augments the “much like” stratagem with what is, arguably, even greater sophistication. Quite unlike the paradisiacal territories of *The Phoenix*, *The Seafarer* presents a *middangeard* “middle-dwelling” (*Sf*, 90b) situation closer to that we find in Bede; there is no elaborate depiction of otherworldly locations, nor the evangelical assuredness that comes with overt and complete allegory; nor, in fact, are birds even explicitly associated with human souls. As in the famous analogy, we encounter the same fluctuations between hall-life and the daunting outside world, the mind that weighs up the two in opposition, and birds that are associated with both these worlds.

*The Seafarer* poet, however, turn Bede’s vision inside out. The speaker wilfully adopt the ascetic, torturous hardships of sea life to seek a mysterious *elþeodigra* “homeland” (38a) over the horizons, and “indoors flying” (“Dark Age Glosses”, 15) becomes outdoors flying. Out here, in a real-world marine territory between cliffs and high seas, the seafarer encounters a very particular *anlicum fugele* suited to the alienation and uncertainties that accompany their faith voyages; not a mythic species dwelling in fabled lands, nor even a solitary sparrow, but native European seabirds, all seen and heard off Anglo-Saxon shores. [*B*]*rimfuglas* (to give them their Old English name as it appears in *The Wanderer*) are the most noticeable feature of ocean life in an extended passage in which each bird is individually named.[[12]](#footnote-12) In a text that is conspicuously preoccupied with what is not material, and in which birds are ultimately pressed to metaphorical purposes, these real seabirds introduce a curious avian materiality. It is the literal/figurative nuance established in the seafarer’s intentional interactions with named seabirds that form the focus of the present study, because it prepares us for the synchrony between these early experiences and the much studied flight imagery at lines 58-64a: externalised spiritual flight should specifically recall seabirds, whose presence in the poem, I will suggest, has roots in Anglo-Saxon ornithology. The poet does not reject or defuse the presence of real, experienced birds, but catches up as part of the ultimate metaphor their conspicuous being and relevance in specific real-world habitats.

This study proceeds in three movements. After detailed consideration of the birds’ names and calls in the context of ornithological knowledge and naming practices to demonstrate their naturalistic presence, I examine the relevance of this avian physicality in the seafarer’s attempted engagement with seabirds, before relating these associations to the much studied *anfloga* “lone-flier” (62b) passage (58-64a). Seabirds, I suggest, so vividly brought to our attention in lines 19b-25a, become the ideal image for Christian pilgrimage because their winter ocean wanderings mirror precisely what the seafarer must do. This conflation of human and avian pelagic lone-dwellers articulates what we might refer to as the “native foreigner”: creatures which shift between land and sea, have “homes” in more than one land, but are equally at home on the seas, that annually return home but are equally characterised by their migrations. Seabirds appear to be native and foreign in this world in the way that human souls are between two homes; temporarily here in the *middengeard* but restlessly always on their way to the true, eternal *ham* “home” that exists over the watery horizons.[[13]](#footnote-13) Moreover, as I will show, this is an intraspecies kinship and voyaging that is troubled by instability as it verges between literal and figurative: the seafarer’s attempts to make seabirds ‘native’ to his own existence and kind, that is, are often compromised because real birds alienate his attempts to construct metaphors. This dynamic, however, does not weaken the metaphor’s effect, but powerfully reflects the paradoxical yearnings and fraught ontological status of the seafarer’s own wanderings. Birds’ strangeness is meaningfully depicted as at once native and yet entirely foreign to the human.

The seabirds in lines 19-25 are the most memorable elements of a physical space that is a hard and unavoidable aspect of the journey. They prepare us for the metaphorical flight of the seafarer which loops back to these observed and named creatures, dependent upon the palpability of real avian encounters which inspire and are then incorporated into the speaker’s salvific enterprise.

*Anglo-Saxon Ornithology*

Anglo-Saxon encounters with real birds have been overlooked, no doubt because most references occur in texts in which it has long been presumed literary tropes govern how the natural world is presented. Recent work in various disciplines has determined to show more fully, however, that real birds were given more than symbolic relevance in many spheres of Anglo-Saxon culture. We might consider, for instance, how the “remarkably long” list of bird species in Old English place names is suggestive of observation and associative links between species and particular environments, or point to the rich assemblies of birds’ names in the extant Old English glossaries (more of which below).[[14]](#footnote-14) Zooarchaeological studies, attempting to move “beyond seeing animals as mere passive resources to be exploited” have explored how the broad range of domestic and wild bird species present on sites across Anglo-Saxon England can yield further ideas about the conspicuous and important roles birds played in the everyday lives of the people who inhabited these places.[[15]](#footnote-15) This is particularly the case for domesticated species, but also for those used in the sport of falconry, whose remains are recovered from high status centres.

We might expect the Anglo-Saxons to be familiar with domesticated species used for food or sport, but may be less persuaded by this sort of interest in wild birds. The evidence, however, strongly suggests that Anglo-Saxon experiences of birds were not generic or limited, and that they observed and responded to species from a wide range of habitats.[[16]](#footnote-16) Excavations at the coastal site of Bishopstone in Sussex, for instance, have turned up a range of wild species, including sea or wader birds, marking them as characteristic inhabitants in and around human settlements in coastal regions. Moreover, the naming of particular seabird species in *The Seafarer* and the focus on their calls implies that these birds did make an impact as avifauna of particular habitats; enough, at least, so that the poet could rely upon their presence to recreate a particular environment and feeling. For the Anglo-Saxons, as Andrew Whitehouse has argued of birdsong in modern times, it is possible that birds’ “sound-making” was an important component of “place-making”.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Identifying or visualising seabirds has a special relevance in *The Seafarer* beyond evocation, which enables the poem’s particular visions of pilgrim-journeying. Bede’s sparrow is a fitting image of Christian transformation largely because of its biblical pedigree. The migrating seabird, though, provides *The Seafarer* poet with a potent image for the migrating soul for reasons that attend more to the bird itself. Seabird species occupy a revealing space between land and sea; liminal, coastal territories which are prominent in *The Seafarer* – the uneasy boundary between the renounced *eorðwelan* “earth-wealth” (67a) for which the speaker laments, and the paradoxically desired hardships sought on the *atol yþa gewealc* “terrible tossing of waves” (6a).[[18]](#footnote-18) Seabirds breed right on these terrestrial margins, many on high sea cliffs that tower over the waves, but travel for vast distances to find food, often for huge spans of time, particularly in winter when they become truly sea-bound creatures.[[19]](#footnote-19) They inhabit a watery realm that might well seem otherworldly or alien, and certainly was treated symbolically in this way in patristic texts that are likely influences upon the poems’ sea-pilgrimage motif, most notably in Augustine’s familiar analogy.[[20]](#footnote-20)The religious journeys of both human bodies and souls, that is, are so well depicted not only by birds generally, whose most noticeable ability is flying, but by birds who master this skill over non-human habitats – mysterious and dangerous seas that stretch beyond the human eye.

The Anglo-Saxons were certainly aware of birds’ ability to migrate, in the sense understood in ornithological terms. Aristotle’s observations on birds were available to churchmen through Pliny’s *Historia naturalia* and Isidore of Seville’s seventh-century *Etymologiae*, the last of which comments, for instance, on how birds like the swallow and stork are “migratory and return at certain seasons”, whilst others “stay in the same location”.[[21]](#footnote-21) Pliny discusses “those fowls that make voyages in flocks over seas and lands”.[[22]](#footnote-22) Old English poetic descriptions of journeying ships that speed *famigheals, fugole gelicost* ‘foamy-necked, bird like’ (*Andreas*, 497), in fact, recall in inversion Pliny’s comparison of swans and geese’s flight pattern with “the beak of ships”.[[23]](#footnote-23) The Anglo-Saxons, keenly aware of their own migrations *ofer ganotes bæð* “over the gannet’s bath” or *swan-rade* “swan road” (*Beowulf*, 1861b and 200a) and wary of invasions from Nordic foreigners across the North Sea, surely understood and responded to birds’ migrations in the broadest sense, too – as creatures who paradoxically “stay in the same location” and are always on the move, soon to be gone and out of sight.[[24]](#footnote-24) Birds are equated with frightening but compelling territories outside human knowledge, like the exotic realms to which Isidore links birds’ unknowable wanderings in his introductory passage to birds, and which lead to their most characteristic quality, that which gives them their Latin name: “They are called birds (*avis*) because they do not have set paths (*via*), but travel by means of pathless (*avia*) ways”.[[25]](#footnote-25) It is, Isidore writes, quite impossible for mankind “to penetrate all the wildernesses of India and Ethiopia and Scythia, so as to know the kinds of birds and their differentiating characteristics”.[[26]](#footnote-26) Seabirds that cannot be fully known, at home on the pathless and equally foreign oceans that the seafarer perversely seeks out, best embody this marvel of avian behaviour.

*Avian Encounters – Naming and Listening*

The short section in *The Seafarer* listing six coastal species has frequently attracted scholars who show an interest in the birds for birds’ sake, particularly from those wanting to examine birds in Old English texts or English literature generally. The list of species has been seen by some as “the first bit of true-sounding, wild-inspired field ornithological record since the Romans”.[[27]](#footnote-27) In the single academic article on identifying the birds, Margaret E. Goldsmith devotes much effort to seeing the poem as a faithful, ornithological depiction; for her the “singling out of several birds implies a close interest in their habits and calls” and she proposes that “the birds of his poem must be familiar sights round the seashore if he is to draw his audience of landsmen with him in imagination”.[[28]](#footnote-28) Although Goldsmith does not relate her conclusions to the larger themes and structures of the poem, in her opening she does place her identifications broadly in the context of literal and allegorical approaches to the poem – “ornithological unlikelihoods (should they exist) make the idea of allegorical intent … less far-fetched”.[[29]](#footnote-29)

Most attention, then, has come from those wishing to compile pre-modern nomenclatures, or seek an Anglo-Saxon ornithology. Little work has been done to examine ways in which the presence of birds in the poem challenges us to reframe our knowledge of Anglo-Saxon perceptions of species relations and distinctions, to recognise that these were, in fact, nuanced, competing, experiential, and that this understanding requires us to reconceive how we interpret the figurative roles of birds in the poem. One response that does represent recent ecocritical interests correctly identifies the seabird passage as significant. Matt Low has recognised in these lines evidence of a “concrete place”: for him the repetition of *þær* “there” (23) is the key word implying an evident literalism, giving emphasis as it does to location.[[30]](#footnote-30) Oddly, Low does nothing more than assign the birds “prevalent” status, and his analysis ends typically, by remarking how the physicality of place reflects the speaker’s torment in “traversing these hostile environments”.[[31]](#footnote-31) A closer, bird-centred reading of the relevant lines, however, suggests how the poet establishes a complex interrelation between human and bird which is particularly dependent on the acts of listening and naming.

Rather like Bede’s sparrow, the seabirds’ signification is not clear cut, a characteristic that the poet redoubles, and for which their physicality is largely responsible.[[32]](#footnote-32) They are overtly linked to the hall-life by the seafarer, and yet remain resolutely a part of the terrifying sea-storm environment, as intrinsic to the *iscaldne wæg* “ice-cold way” (14b) as the *hrimgicelum* “icicles” (16a) and *haegl scurum* “hail showers” (16b) that precede them:

Hwilum ylfete song

dyde ic me to gomene, ganetes hleoþor

ond huilpan sweg fore hleahtor wera,

mæw singende fore medodrince.

Stormas þær stanclifu beotan þær him stearn oncwæð

isigfeþera; ful oft þæt earn bigeal,

urigfeþra; ne ænig hleomæga

feasceaftig ferð frefran meahte.[[33]](#footnote-33)

(19b-26)

[Sometimes the swan’s song I took for my game, the gannet’s sound and curlew’s cry for man’s laughter, gull’s singing for the mead-drink. There storms beat stone cliffs, there the tern answered them, icy-feathered; very often the eagle yelled, dewy-feathered; no protecting kinsman can comfort the desolate soul.]

These developed details, as we will see, shift the scene from conventional tableau towards interconnected and affective ecosystem, in which the human speaker will attempt to engage in a complicated manoeuvre that involves simultaneous association and distancing. The elements of “concrete place” that Low recognises in *The Seafarer* include rocky sea cliffs; the seafarer is not just afloat on featureless, generic waters, but more precisely situated in a littoral environment, to which the storm and the tern are linked by alliteration. That characteristic of seabirds as creatures of terrestrial margins is heightened by this reference – the speaker has land in sight even whilst on the ocean (birds, indeed, can even be a navigational sign of land). It is the names and calls of the seabirds that are most “prevalent”, however, not only as evocative elements of the wild, but as the aspects with which the seafarer shows most interest, overtly drawing parallels between human and nonhuman realms.

The act of naming species is a central part of the effect in this passage, not only because it involves precision, or because we are dealing with birds other than the literary-invested raven and eagle, but because naming practices in themselves were central scholastic activities, not only in grammar, or in the extensive etymological lists in Isidore’s *Etymologies*, but in reading or writing the different types of glosses that accompanied important Latin texts. Birds appear in a good number of extant glossaries, and the vernacular terms often show close observation of species’ appearances, calls and habits; to name birds meant to know birds to some degree, to recognise that this or that Latin avian term equated to an English name rooted in some form of actual or potential experience.[[34]](#footnote-34) It is reasonable to speculate, then, that the intellectual monastic environment in which *The Seafarer* was likely written and copied made available or familiar other examples of bird-naming.[[35]](#footnote-35) In this broader intellectual context, naming seabirds is meaningful beyond establishing a generic backdrop because it engages with an attention to linguistic detail that does not, to judge from evidence like the class glossaries, ignore experiences with the physical, natural world.

This is particularly the case when we consider the role that bird sounds appear to have played in the procedures of Anglo-Saxon naming. The authors of the Bishopstone study propose that birdsong and calls were, in fact, “key aspects of people’s daily lives”.[[36]](#footnote-36) For them, literary evidence supports a wide range of species discovered in the excavations to reveal an archaeacoustic reconstruction. They cite other archaeological evidence to demonstrate how receptive Anglo-Saxons were to avian aurality. In one series of coins, for instance, depicting the five senses, hearing is represented by a bird perched on a person’s shoulder.[[37]](#footnote-37) A survey of vernacular bird names in Old English glossaries reveals a preponderance of species named according to appearance, habitat or behaviour, but many more relate to song or call. Many common bird names are onomatopoeic: *finc* “finch”, *hroc* “rook2, *crawe* “crow”, *cio* “chough”. There are many more, though, that associate a particular species with distinctive sound: *swon* “swan”, *nihtegale* “nightingale”, *raredumle* “reed-boomer” (bittern), *hæferblæte* “goat-bleater” (snipe).[[38]](#footnote-38) Onomatopoeic names were native to Germanic languages, but a key source like Isidore may also have encouraged the practice: “Many bird names are evidently constructed from the sound of their calls, such as the crane (*grus*), the crow (*corvus*), the swan (*cygnus)*, the peacock (*pavo*), the kite (*milvus*), the screech owl (*ulula*), the cuckoo (*cuculus*), the jackdaw (*graculus*), et cetera. The variety of their calls taught people what they might be called”.[[39]](#footnote-39) This lexicographical focus on bird sounds is evident in *The Seafarer*’s seabird passage – two of the birds listed have what are likely to be onomatopoeic names, the *huilpan* and *mæw*.[[40]](#footnote-40) Moreover, the speaker foregrounds the birds’ calls; all six utter sound, emphasised through the poet’s range of sonic nouns. There are some similarities to be made with the Exeterbird riddles, which are also rich in aural effects and further emphasis the impact of sounds: the swan (Riddle 7), like its *Seafarer* counterpart, *singað* (9a), and there is a shared vocabulary of nouns and verbs for song or call between the elegy and the riddles; e.g., the jay (Riddle 24), a bird noted for its remarkable ability to imitate the voices of all sorts of other creatures (including the *mæwes song* (6b)), can *gielle* “cry out” (3b) another’s *hleoþor* “sound” and *reorde* “voice” (5). *Hleoþor* appears in the seabird passage itself, and the other two appear in the later *anfloga* passage (53b, 62b).

*Avian Encounters – Strange Relations*

The birds’ calls establish a physical, observed sense of place couched in genuine Anglo-Saxon ornithology, but they are also central to another striking aspect of *The Seafarer*: the speaker engages with these animate elements of his surroundings to become embroiled through his own volition. The seafarer’s experiences draw purposeful, explicit connections between species’ calls and aspects of land- and hall-life.

This association with the seabirds has attracted mixed responses. At one end of the spectrum, some have gone so far as to suggest “something akin to pleasure” in this sequence, close to a “masochistic smugness”, as Nicholas Jacobs tentatively puts it.[[41]](#footnote-41) He even suggests congruence with a passage from *Guthlac A* (739-45) which depicts the natural world favourably in a spring depiction. Because instances like *Guthlac* show us that “a distrust of the natural world” is not a “universal feature”, it is possible that in *The Seafarer*, as in some speculated Irish sources, the “pleasures of nature afford a fair exchange for those of civilisation”.[[42]](#footnote-42) Jacobs’ response, however, is rare, and even he is speculative. Most, aligning the scene with conventional nature tropes in Old English poetry, see the seafarer’s identification with birds working anthropocentrically and conversely; that is, the association is designed to remind us that the seafarer *lacks* company (or company that counts, anyhow) and, therefore, the birds are only relevant as indicators of human absence. Any likeness is spurious – *gomene*, *hleahtor* and *medodrince* are intended with gloomy irony.[[43]](#footnote-43) Jennifer Neville cites the end of the seabird passage (25b-26) when the seafarer expresses deep grief as clear evidence that the scene is of no inspiration to the speaker, pitching it against the very moment from *Guthlac* with which Jacobs finds an element of similarity.[[44]](#footnote-44)

This prevailing interpretation is not one that I deny or dismiss. Contrasts between human and nonhuman elements in the poem are present, and significant. Nor do I see “new-found exultation”.[[45]](#footnote-45) The seafarer’s paradoxical choice at the heart of the poem, as Holton demonstrates, produces a rich and difficult sea imagery, capable of symbolising a range of contradicting meanings.[[46]](#footnote-46) This same paradox recommends more nuanced ways of reading the seafarer’s mood and relation to the birds, which are a striking aspect of this seascape. Whether travel occurs for pilgrimage or other reasons, whether it is allegorical or actual, the persistent emphasis on choosing *hean streamas*, / *sealtyþa gelac* “the high seas, tumult of the salty waves” (34-5) in contrast to land-dwellers *wingal* “flushed with wine” (29a) can imply sincerity in the seafarer’s business as much as irony – *dyde* is not so much making do, but repeated (*Whilum; ful oft*), proactive, and willing adaptation. Taking ascetic pleasure in the birds’ presence and their substitutive acts suits well the concept of the *peregrinatio*; they can be simultaneously desired and deplored. Attending to moments like these reveals connections that are not linear or simple (birds’ presence equals grievous human absence), but subtle and interrelated. The connections between species are inconsistent, but this dynamic is part of a cohesive use of the bird figure across the text, and in attending to it we can appreciate another way in which the long debated literal and allegorical aspects of the text might co-exist.[[47]](#footnote-47) Indeed, *The Seafarer*’s birds, stubbornly literal and well as powerfully figurative, are perhaps one of the key elements of the text that do point the way towards this co-existence. In the final stages of this analysis I will consider how complex bird-human relations, permeated by competing affinities and differences, do not so much point towards what the seafarer has left behind, but look forward to anticipate in more literal terms the closeness of bird and man that takes place when the seafarer imagines his *modsefa* “spirit” (59a) enacting a migration across oceans (60-4a). The profound bird-soul will also require us to hold in one view likeness and difference.

These tensions between species, however, are prepared for in the speaker’s dealings with real seabirds. The final lines of the seabird passage are characteristic: *ne ænig hleomæga* / *feasceaftig ferð frefran meahte* “no protecting kinsman can comfort the desolate soul” (25b-6). Immediately following the list of species, its syntactical position implies that we read the line as a comment in response to the preceding correspondences, an indication as to how the seafarer relates to the birds, or why they are important. On the face of it, these lines provide evidence of the seabirds’ negative impact, as Neville argues. For those who favour the idea that nature is only a hostile opposite, words such as “miserable” or “wretched” for *feasceaftig* are most appropriate. Others choose to translate as “desolate”, and Bosworth and Toller offer “poor, destitute”, both of which allow more easily for the contented suffering of a voluntary exile who renounces worldly values.[[48]](#footnote-48) All of them, however, allow us to interpret lines 25b-6 as a forlorn exclamation from the seafarer that there is no one to help: not simply because he is at sea and his kinsmen on land or dead, but because they cannot help with a journey which must be confronted alone. For some, these lines immediately following the list of birds clarify why the speaker is unhappy – because birds are all he has for company, not humans. There is another way of reading this, though, which inverts the previous reading: that is, the seafarer turns to birds for game and laughter and song because no human is able to comfort him.[[49]](#footnote-49) It is precisely because *ne ænig hleomæga / feasceaftig ferð frefran meahte* that the birds are necessary and desirable as companions. *Meahte*, translatable as a number of modal auxiliaries (can, could, might), lends the sentence a gnomic quality: in this life there is no comfort to be had from other men. Unlike typical instances, then, the birds are brought purposefully into the human frame, not defined against it.

Specifically, it is the birds’ cries that summon nostalgic thoughts of human companionship for the seafarer. Returning to the emphasis on sounds in this passage reveals this meeting of contradictory attitudes in the intricate patterning of bird-human likeness and difference. The aural identification with birds is embedded in the poet’s composition of the passage, and resonates with those preoccupations and responses to birds’ sounds that we discussed above. The structure of the Old English line produces contrast, but also suggests parity between the bird and human.[[50]](#footnote-50) This is particularly evident in lines 21-22 which use the caesura most symmetrically to create the effect, supported by the placing of *fore* “in place of” at the beginning of the B lines, indicating that the birds stand for the human, not in opposition:[[51]](#footnote-51)

ond huilpan sweg fore hleahtor wera,

mæw singende fore medodrince.

(21-22)

[and curlew’s cry for man’s laughter, gull’s singing for the mead-drink.]

Human merriment and bird voices are bound up together in dense alliterative patterns: there is a triplet of words denoting sound (*song*, *sweg*, *singende*) and a cluster of words circling around the consonants of men’s *hleahtor*. Aspects such as this can indicate straightforward substitution, in which raucous or jarring bird calls are made to stand ironically for more pleasant, articulate human sounds: from a conventional perspective, the seafarer is presumably miserable because a curlew or gannet’s calls do not actually sound like human laughter. Laughter, perhaps the most distinctively human sound here, may well seem opposed to the shrieks of seabirds because it is associated with “the bright world of the Germanic hall”: for Hugh Magennis, the reference to men’s laughter is part of the “ironic image” of the whole passage. But he also recognises in his study of laughter in the poem that this human sound (like Holton’s sea imagery) suffers from contradictions, that it is “double-sided”, an image of relief and dismay.[[52]](#footnote-52) Birds, too, directly paralleled with “double-sided” laughter at this moment, are blurry sites of meaning. The ironic contrast of human laughter with the curlew’s cries simultaneously suggests kinship through the alliteration, which not only links *huilpan* and *hleahtor* (echoed, too, in *hleomæga*), but binds *hleahtor* to the gannet’s *hleoþor* in an even closer linguistic resonance.[[53]](#footnote-53) Poole and Lacey comment that the collocation of curlew cry and human laughter intentionally recalls the formulaic phrase *hearpan sweg* “the harp’s sound”, a detail which they take to infer the bird’s musicality, rather than just an evocation of hall-life.[[54]](#footnote-54)

This shuttling effect between difference and similarity is also conveyed in the vocabulary used to denote voices and sounds in the seabird passage. As we noted in the bird riddles, the stock of Old English words conveying sounds could variously and broadly mean “voice”, “cry”, “speech”, “song”, and be applied to both human or nonhuman agents.[[55]](#footnote-55) In these poems, there is a playful confusion between voices that are simultaneously conflated and distinguished so that, as Robert Stanton puts it, “observable sounds of birds … become one with the representation in a human system of signification”.[[56]](#footnote-56) Something of this ambiguity seems intentional in *The Seafarer* as well. The swan’s *song* and gull’s *singende* may imply an element of personification, particularly for the Anglo-Saxon mind which associates song as a typical part of hall pleasures, but the terms can exist neutrally as expressions of the birds’ natural voices, too, which also can be said to sing. The same goes for *sweg* (which can mean “confused sound, din”, or the opposite, “articulate sound”, such as that of birdsong) and *bigeal* (“celebrate with song”, “to scream”).[[57]](#footnote-57) As Swanton remarks about the bird riddles, this vocabulary, present in those poems as well as the *Seafarer*, involves a “tension between natural, instinctive utterance and conventionally assigned meaning”.[[58]](#footnote-58) Institutional distinctions between articulate human speech and inarticulate nonhuman sound that pervade scholastic theories, and which might be said to highlight opposition in the seabird passage, are not consistent in poetic treatments, or, indeed, in the vernacular language itself. Old English sound words, as in Modern English, are broad in their scope and application, encompassing, distinguishing and combining any number of human, nonhuman and inanimate subjects which might produce sounds of various and contiguous types. In a particular context, of course, a writer can intend a particular meaning of *sang*, but a poetic text such as *The Seafarer*, which explicitly correlates bird and human sounds, appears to rely upon the potential ambiguity for its overall effect, so that sound types are blurred into a cross-species category. Onomatopoeic names (*mæw*, *huilpan*), bound up in grammars concerned with defining voices, and taxonomies which translate birds’ calls into human-replicated and human-assigned terms, demonstrate this particularly well; to speak the name (as the seafarer does) is to also enact the call the bird makes, melding human and avian vocalisations. When the birds make sound, perhaps the seafarer thinks of how they recall, even seem to imitate, human utterances.[[59]](#footnote-59) They encourage a strange, unstable correlation which can raise equal sorrow or solace.

The artful linking of bird and human in *The Seafarer* reveals an unstable pattern of correspondence and discord; the birds and their calls oscillate between human and nonhuman worlds for the speaker; at one and the same time loosed from their natural environments to partake figuratively in the human realm, whilst remaining distinctly nonhuman. The assimilation suggests a kin between species, even a form of comfort perhaps, but also exposes the ultimate foreignness of human and nonhuman species, despite the connections the speaker makes. Indeed, the poet press these differences between species further, even to the extent that the natural world puts up an apparent resistance to the speaker’s attempts to engage, as though to give reflexive attention to the inconsistencies inherent in the metaphor procedures.

Unsurprisingly, these resistances are located in the interplay of voices. Although the seafarer does not speak out to the birds, there is an implied discourse in the repeated utterances. In the sense that the birds are company now – their vocalisations replacing the sounds of revelry back on land – the seafarer engages with their utterances, but what is more apparent is the dialogue existing between birds, and birds with their environment. The vocative is raised when the storms beat cliffs, a noisy action promoted to the status of utterance through parallel syntax: *þær stanclifu beotan*, *þær him stearn oncwæð*. The tern “answers” to the storm’s swell against rock (another vocal term that can be applied to animate and inanimate subjects in Old English).[[60]](#footnote-60) The eagle, too, may well be joining the conversation: *ful oft þæt earn bigeal*. It is unclear to which subject *þæt* applies – to the eagle itself, the storm or the cliffs – but the repetition of syntax ending the line (noun-verb) and adjacent *isigfeþera*/*urigfeþra* combine to give a sense of interrelation.[[61]](#footnote-61) The whole passage, therefore, falls into two parts. The first of these has the seafarer correlate human and nonhuman worlds by his own volition, but the second frames him out; the interactions continue without him, the *stearn* answers to storm, waves and cliffs, not him.

Metaphor disperses, but the birds remain. If the seafarer associates with these creatures in the first half of the sequence, what happens in the second is that the birds signal their own ‘foreign’ agencies, which have nothing to do with human meanings. The vocalisations that are drawn into metaphor (or, at least, suggest their potential for metaphor) turn back towards the living creature. Birds can be part of that “backdrop against which society struggles to defend itself”, but the modulation between human and nonhuman is not a simple binary.[[62]](#footnote-62) These birds are creatures that, in Rosi Braidotti’s words, “can do a great deal”; they are “a field of forces, a quantity of speed and intensity, and a cluster of capabilities” even within the figuration process.[[63]](#footnote-63) More precisely, these birds do answer; they “talk back” perversely, through resisting. The seafarer’s attempts to connect, whether positively or negatively, are frustrated, because these vividly real birds make it impossible for nonhuman creatures to function smoothly or wholly as metaphor.

*The Lone-Flier’s Migrating Act*

For most critics of the elegy, it is not the real seabirds, but the numinous, mysterious bird-soul that attracts attention. *The Seafarer*’s enigmatic *anfloga* has been much studied for what it tells us about Anglo-Saxon perceptions of minds and souls, or to discover the pagan and Christian sources informing it.[[64]](#footnote-64) In the final part of this chapter, however, I examine the ultimate effect of the bird-soul as the result of complex relations between species in the initial avian encounters, which is not simply a passing echo, but critical to the ultimate relevance of seabirds in this Christian poem about real and speculative transcendence. The pivotal moment when the speaker properly considers himself and his own seaward journey not only projects us towards speculative spiritual (and bodily) journeys, but returns us to the intricate coming-togethers of bird and human in those scenes with sprayed feathers and lonely calls. Considering these two moments in the poem more closely also reveals how conflicting literal and allegorical strands that beset the poem can meaningfully co-exist. I suggest that the profound pilgrimage towards heaven to which all Christians should aspire necessitates an intricate metaphor which can be concurrently literal and figurative, native and foreign to the human, because it mimics the negotiations between land and sea, body and soul, earthly and heavenly in the seafarer’s pursuit of spiritual transformation, but also reveals an important strangeness (a foreignness) between nonhuman and human.

The bird-soul figure appears at a thematically key, and structurally central, moment: the passage is significantly placed at the poem’s centre, at a turn in its structures (marked by the *Forþon* conjunction [64]) when the speaker’s vision moves outwards from the seascape to consider more universally the *contemptus mundi* theme. It occurs some thirty-eight lines after the seabird description, but the two moments are linked by the introduction of another (seventh) named species (*geac* “cuckoo” [53]):

Forþon 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 desire roams beyond the breast-locker, my spirit with the sea-flood, over the whale’s home travels widely, earth’s expanses, comes again to me, eager and greedy; the lone-flier yells, urges the breast on the whale-path without hesitation, over reaches of oceans.]

Recognising a fuller correlation between the seabirds and the flying souls is one way of approaching the complications critics of these poems have always faced in explaining the passage in which the spirit appears. Although it is agreed that the speaker’s disembodied perceptions or soul are depicted in some sort of bird-like travel over the oceans, there is disagreement about exactly how they perform: whether the soul-travelling should be taken literally or metaphorically, and precisely what are the frustrating identities and relations of the *hyge*, *modsefa*, *anfloga* and *hreþer* – to what extent, in fact, should we perceive the bird as a feature of any of these, or the *anfloga* be associated with the other entities.[[65]](#footnote-65) For my purposes, the prior dealings with seabirds recommend that the ambiguity surrounding these issues (like that concerning the compatibility of the poem’s literal and allegorical elements) does not require a neat reconciliation. Rather, the palpability of birds seen and experienced on the seas informs the effect that many argue for in the poem’s presentation of the “lone-flier” – a physicality that suggests “more literal movement than mere thought”.[[66]](#footnote-66)

In *The Seafarer*, the flights of the souls themselves have been seen as entirely metaphoric, and as literal journeys by the disembodied soul or mind. The question of whether the *hyge* and *modsefa*’s flights are real or not echoes the nexus of real/figurative relations we encountered earlier on. Real birds, on the one hand, may suggest to us the realism of a pilgrimage journey or anticipate souls or minds genuinely taking flight beyond the confines of the body – a literal, nautical enactment of the birds’ peregrinations. On the other, birds fly in a real sense that can only be achieved imaginatively by humans as a prospective thought experiment; even if there is actual sallying forth beyond the body, this literal sense is still only a precursory cognitive venture which is *figuratively* like a bird’s flight. The metaphoric assimilation of man and bird is not reductive, however; the physical connotations and strong sense of avian voices or actions earlier in the poems are intrinsic to a rich bird-human metaphor that is imbued with those experiential understandings of, and interactions with birds that I have explored above. One approach, in fact, can even lead into the other: a literal *modsefa* ventures out and returns to incite the seafarer to undertake a perilous sea-journey, which is both real and a metaphor for spiritual, ascetic sufferance, the “fulfilment of an ideal” that will be reified upon death and, more so, upon judgement *þonne ealre þisse worulde wela* *weste stondeð* “when all this world’s wealth lies waste”, to borrow from *The Wanderer* (74).[[67]](#footnote-67)

Close scrutiny of the *anfloga* passage reveals that is not only characterised by the sorts of nuances which both assimilate and distance birds and humans in the seabird scene, but that the language is also particularly suggestive of the actions of migrating. This is made most apparent by the addition of another bird only a few lines before which serves to re-adumbrate the connection between birds and souls in the coming metaphor. As is emphasised in most analyses of the cuckoo’s purpose, the species urges *sefan* … / *on flodwegas feor gewitan* “the mind … to travel far upon the ocean paths” (51-2). The cuckoo’s *geomran reorde* “mournful cry” (53b) is a reminder of earthly temptations in the welcoming season of spring, and in this regard has often been traced to analogous instances in Welsh sources to account for this reasoning of the bird’s presence.[[68]](#footnote-68) As much as any of the birds, the cuckoo brings contradictions. It is *sumeres weard* “summer’s guardian” (54a), a land-returner come to breed, and thus associated with those attractive vernal qualities the seafarer is keen to avoid (48-9). It is also, though, a prompt to seek out the open seas well beyond land, and its encouragement is linked clearly to the human spirit’s journeying desire through the verb attending each subject – the seafarer’s will or mind *Monað* “urges” (36a) his *ferð to feran* “spirit to set out” just as the cuckoo *monað* (53a).

With this persistent reference to journeying, surely another relevance to the cuckoo is that it specifies again the importance of birds that fly great distances to the poem’s theme, that return *ham* each year but other times mysteriously travel *Ofer hwæles eþel hweorfeð wide, / Eorþan sceatas*, recalling the “wildernesses” and “pathless ways” with which Isidore associates birds.[[69]](#footnote-69) The cuckoo, then, recalls the former seabirds, and all are present in a multiplex figure that combines bird and Christian pilgrim as migrating species – a *hapex legomenon* that points to its deliberateness in this poem because it seems to adapt the more usual *anhaga* term which is already attached to birds in other religious texts.[[70]](#footnote-70) The *anfloga* “lone-flier” has been the subject of much study, and readers tend to argue for either the cuckoo or the seafarer’s soul as its identity.[[71]](#footnote-71) With the earlier interactions and correlations between species in mind, however, this enigmatic being seems best read as a hybrid. To be sure, the *anfloga*’s vocalisation (*gielleð*) convincingly echoes the cuckoo’s *reorde*, and on this basis Gordon argues that it cannot be the soul because the “emphasis on the cries, which could have little or no metaphorical significance, would make such an image absurd”. She also dismisses the possibility of a seabird because “there has been no previous mention of a sea-bird to connect with the *anfloga*”.[[72]](#footnote-72) This is inaccurate – there has been mention of seabirds, and this mention represents the dominant avian presence in the poem, making it well intended to inform our interpretation of the *anfloga*. Specifically, the lone-flier’s call may remind us of the central feature of the earlier birds’ effect on the speaker – it is their voices which are prominent. In contradiction to Gordon’s remark, it makes excellent sense for the *anfloga* to call out, bird-like. One of the earlier seabirds, the *earn*, in fact, shares a preterite form of the same verb (*bigiellan*) used to express the *anfloga*’s cry. The utterance made by the figure should not faze us, nor encourage us to see its identity singularly as the cuckoo, but to recognise how numerous avian referents are conflated with the human in an image of solitary flying – the seafarer is not separate to the cuckoo or seabirds at this point, but intimately linked through the soul’s mimicking distinctive vocalisations as it enacts far-wandering avian flight.[[73]](#footnote-73)

This migratory *lust* (36a) of heaven-seeking minds, spirits and birds, evident in the poem’s journeying vocabulary throughout, is concentrated in the *anfloga* passage through continuous references to urgency, movement and distance, right before we reach the structural *volte* in the poem. [*H*]*weorfeð* occurs twice in three lines (58a, 60b), most simply translatable as “move”, “roam” or “wander”, but the senses of turn or change also work in line 58 in which the *hyge* initiates or itself performs a metamorphosis of sorts, out beyond the body and into mobile form. O*fer* also comes twice in the same number of lines (and again at line 64), conveying a vivid upwards or extending action – “above”, “over”, “beyond”, “across”.[[74]](#footnote-74) It joins *wide*, *eorþan sceatas* and the double whale-kenning to imply expanse which the *modsefa* is keen for the breast to traverse *nu*, *unwearnum*. In moving as a migrating bird across these spaces, the seafarer is *mid mereflode*, not merely *ofer*, as akin to the environment as he is to the bird. So, too, like the periodic returning action of the cuckoo and the seabirds, the *hyge* and *anfloga* *cymeð eft to me*, urging the speaker on the life-long return journey *ham*.

Seafaring does not stop when we reach the homiletic concluding passage the poem: the most significant travelling begins when one recognises and eschews the temporality and decay of the world, is enjoined by these revelations and follows the *modsefa*’s lead to mimic seabirds’ pelagic wanderings, the soul in its temporary dwelling heading onwards until it is finally released and can make its own, disembodied final flight.[[75]](#footnote-75) Literally and metaphorically, this resignation and wilful commitment is prompted by the flight of real birds. At the very moment when the seafarer thinks of setting over the sea he moves with conviction into his *contemptus mundi* theme. The conjunctive *Forþon* “For this reason, therefore, for” (64b) leads us from the lone-flier image prompting the seafarer’s own irresistibly urged journey *ofer holma gelagu* directly into a rejection of the pleasures available in *þis deade lif* / *læne on londe* “this dead life / loaned on land” (65b-66a). A fear of worldly and bodily demise as *Yldo him on fareð* “Age comes upon him” is overcome by faith in God, towards whom the seafarer will journey successively in mind, body and soul by enacting the ocean-wandering bird’s flight. Birds, too, offer structural unity between lines 1-64a and 64b-124.

*The Native Foreignness of Seabirds*

The affinities between bird and human speaker finally cohere in the metaphoric vision of souls as winged beings, but something of that resistance to bird-human embroilment lingers. I have argued that it is right to see both avian and human referents in this calling creature, but it is also true that the passage is marked by obscurity. There is no firm evidence that heaven is where the seafarer is headed, nor imagery of what it looks like – it is always implied, always stays the *incertum* that is over the horizon (to refer back to Bede), *ofer holma gelagu* where it must be speculated. As North memorably puts it, the poem only involves an “intuition of heaven”.[[76]](#footnote-76) The future is uncertain, and *Forþon nis þæs modwlonc mon … / þæt he a his sæfore sorge næbbe, / to hwon hine Dryhten gedon wille* “So, there is no man so proud-spirited ... / that he never has worries in his seafaring as to what his Lord will do” (39-43). The same mystery pervades the *anfloga* which encourages the body to head for this unspecified destination – it is an avian species separate to the *hyge* and *modsefa*, and is a third term to describe whatever human element has soared out from the breast.

Birds do not achieve complete or overt assimilation with the human, but this, paradoxically, is part of the migration metaphor’s powerful effect in articulating the theological predicament faced by the seafarer. Throughout the poem, his bleak contemplation oscillates between dichotomies – between hot and cold, land and sea (and their respective lifestyles), earth and heaven, between distress over exile from comfortable land-living (the “dead life”) and a resolve to face miserable sea-dwelling, between body and psychological components (mind, aim, heart, soul, spirit), and between human and nonhuman worlds. The seabirds, and the cuckoo, inhabit all these aspects – they are land-dwellers that wander far to other homes in mysterious lands over the reaches of the great oceans, characterised by flight which enables them to transcend from one realm to another.

The wandering birds present an enviable ability to mimic in constructing a solution to the soul’s progress and fate – to the *hu* – but their enigmatic, unfathomable characters which we cannot know also dislocate the human from the nonhuman in being a reminder of the ultimate mysteries of God in heaven and our return, distance journey to him. The duality of birds in *The Seafarer*, at the centre of a poem which deals with complex sets of interlocking dualisms, embraces representations in the Augustinian mode, whereby literal and symbolic signifiers co-exist. The seabird, in this sense, is a sign (*signum) est quod et se ipsum sensui et praeter se aliquid animo ostendit* “which is itself sensed (or apprehended in itself) and which indicates the mind something beyond the sign itself” (*De dialectica*, 5).[[77]](#footnote-77) In other words (to invert the original sense of one of the best known formations of this notion) it demonstrates how “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”.[[78]](#footnote-78) Factual and figurative birds are, indeed, inseparable, and remind us that a heaven-bound spiritual transformation begins with a necessary, physically experienced journey here on earth towards unknown horizons.

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1. MacNeice, 133. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Unless otherwise stated, all quotations from OE are to Krapp and Dobbie. A facsimile of the Exeter Book is included in Muir. All translations are my own. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Hume, 63. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The other existing version of Edwin’s conversion also attaches augury to the event. Unlike the sparrow in Bede, however, an ominous corvid threatens to overturn the conversion by “croaking from an unpropitious quarter of the sky”. Colgrave, *Gregory the Great*, 6-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For the passage, see Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors, 182-3.For the OE translation, see Miller, II.x, 134-6. The relevant line reads: *cume an spearwa & hrædlice þæt hus þurhfleo* ‘[there] came a sparrow and swiftly through the house flew’. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Spearwa* consistently glosses *passer* in OE translations. The term could carry the same general identification as *passer* likely did in Latin: Ælfric glosses *passer* as *spearewa oððe lytel fugel* ‘sparrow or little bird’. Zupitza, 307. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Augustine, XI.ii, 188. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Cf. also Psalm 54.6 and Matthew 10.29-31. The psalms were certainly available to Anglo-Saxon monastics in Latin psalters and, after Bede’s time, in OE translations, such as the Paris Psalter. For Ælfric’s allusion to the sparrow from Psalm 124 above (123 in the Paris Psalter), see “Forty Soliders” in Skeat. The thirteenth-century *Ancrene Wisse* also employs the solitary sparrow from these psalms as a paradigm for anchorite reclusiveness; see Millet, III.xvii. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. For a study of the symbolic sparrow and its biblical sources in Bede’s *Historia ecclesiastica*, see Ramirez, 167-95 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See Ellard for an examination of *The Phoenix*. Ellard insightfully explore the enigmatic qualities of birds that I address even more precisely here in relation to a particular sort of bird. The present study was first conceived as a PhD chapter in 2010; since then, only Ellard has written specifically from an environmental perspective on the role of birds in OE poetry. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. As in Psalm 101.8 in the Lambeth Psalter. For the text, see Lindelöf. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. There is no space here for discussion of *The Wanderer*’s seabirds, but there are certainly comparable treatments between the poems that imply a wider identification of seabirds with the themes of journeying and solitude treated by both poets. For one such study, see Osborn. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Although the flight in lines 58-64a is often identified as that of the soul, some scholars have recommended closer distinction between *hyge*, *modsefa* and *hreþer* (see below, p. 28, n. 64). In concurring with these distinctions, the bird-soul figure should more accurately be referred to as the bird-aim (*hyge*) or the bird-mind (*modsefa*) at different points, but for the sake of consistency and clarity, unless otherwise specified, I will refer to the bird-soul throughout. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See Hooke. The section on bird-related place names is by some way the longest in this essay and demonstrates how “intimately aware” people were of birds as part of their everyday experiences with their surroundings (258). Consider, e.g., a name component such as *on masen mere* “to the pond frequented by the tit-mouse” (276). See also the lists in Yalden and Albarella. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Poole and Lacey, 410-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See the extensive list of archaeological Anglo-Saxon records in Yalden and Albarella, 130-34. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Whitehouse, 58. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. The seafarer makes four distinct breaks from the seascape to address land-living: see lines 12-17, 27-30, 39-46 and 55-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Seabirds exemplify the solitude that the psalms traditionally attribute to the sparrow. The whooper swan migrates from the Arctic circle to winter in Britain. The gannet, like most true seabirds, disperses and flies great distances out into the Atlantic in winter. Gulls in winter are generally marked by the same pattern, but they do inhabit coasts all year round, too. See distribution maps, e.g., for herring gull and kittiwake, in Cramp, vol. 1, 743 and 760. The curlew is not technically a seabird, but is associated with winter estuarine territories, is migratory and ‘commonly solitary’; Cramp, vol. 1, 660. White-tailed eagles (sea eagles) are generally linked with ‘sea coasts’, ‘dispersive, or migratory’ and ‘typically solitary’; Cramp, vol. 1, 306. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. E.g., *Enarratio in Psalmum* 125, *De civitate Dei*, XV.ii, and *De doctrina christiana*, iii.25 and 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Barney, XII.vii.1. Cf. Pliny’s reference to the swallow; Pliny, X.xxiv. Cf. also Aldhelm’s Latin riddles on the swallow (22) and the nightingale (46) which both reference the species’ migratory habits. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Pliny, X.xxiii. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. For discussion of Anglo-Saxon perceptions of their own continental migrations, see Howe, who describes their initial migrations from the continent as the “founding and defining event of their culture”. Howe, ix [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Barney, XII.vii.3. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Barney. XII.i.2. Cf. the opening to *The Phoenix*: *Hæbbe ic gefrugnen þætte is feor heonan* / *eastdælum on æþlast londa* … *Nis se foldan sceat ofer middangeard mongum gefere* “I have heard that there is far hence in eastern parts a noblest land … that corner of the earth is not easy of access to many throughout this world” (1-4). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Fisher, 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Goldsmith, 225 and 226. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Goldsmith, 226. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Low, 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Low, 11. More recently, Helen Price has given the birds a little more attention, but is more concerned with the wider ecosystem of land and water in the elegies. Price, 289-92. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. The equivocal sparrow can signify both a pitiable mortality, but also the enlightened and eternal soul, following conversion. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. The *huilpan* and *stearn* have never been satisfactorily identified. For a full discussion on possible species, see Goldsmith. Following most editors, I translate *huilpan* as “curlew” on the basis of cognates in Germanic languages (e.g., Mn Dutch *wulp*; see Lockwood, s.v. *whaup*), the distinctive “bubbling” or “whaup” call of this species (*BWP*,vol. 1, 660), and its common presence in British coastal regions. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Birds are numerous in OE glosses and glossaries. Best known are the Second Antwerp glossary and the Second Cleopatra glossary, for which see Porter and Quinn, respectively. For an outdated, but comprehensive list of OE bird names, see Whitman. See also, Kitson and, most recently, Lacey, who gives a full list of birds recorded in OE. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. All the birds listed in the poem, except *huilpe*, are attested in at least one of the extant glossaries. In the Second Antwerp glossary, e.g., we find *ylfete*, *earn*, *stearn*, *mæw*; and in the Second Cleopatra glossary *ganot*. See Porter and Quinn, respectively. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Poole and Lacey, 400 (abstract). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Poole and Lacey, 403. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Names relating to habitat, behaviour or appearance include: *þisteltwige* “thistle-twig” (goldfinch), *duce* “duck”, and *rudduc* “ruddy one” (robin). Monosyllabic, onomatopoeic names tend to have a Proto-Germanic/Proto-Indo-European origin, but the compound terms seem to be of Anglo-Saxon invention. For detailed references, see Kitson, Lacey, and Lockwood. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Barney, XII.vii.9. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Bosworth and Toller define *huilpan* as “the name of a bird so called from its note”. *Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, s.v. *huilpan*. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Jacobs, 28. Cf. Ireland, 7-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Jacobs, 127. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. On the absence of irony in these lines, see Timmer. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Neville, 36. For P. R. Orton, the birds are “pathetically inadequate substitutes”; Orton, “Form and Structure”, 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Jacobs, 128. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. On the sea imagery, see Holton. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. For an allegorical interpretation, see, e.g., Smithers, or Calder. For the most famous example of a literal interpretation, see Whitelock. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. See, e.g., Marsden and Gordan. See also Bosworth and Toller, s.v. *feasceaftig*. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. North reads the passage along these lines: he comments that the “question is not how much the Seafarer bemoans all this feathered wildlife … but how soon he comes to regard it as superior”; “the eagle and his part are welcome to take their [kinsmen’s] place”. North, 14-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. For this reason, Roy F. Leslie has suggested alternative punctuation in the passage: “If we place a stop after *song* at the end of line 19, *ylfete song* becomes an additional object of *gehyrde* (18) in the first sentence, and we have a one-to-one correspondence in the second: the cry of the gannet for pleasure, the curlew’s call for the laughter of men, and the gull singing for the mead-drinking”. Leslie, 118. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Jacobs examines the grammatical evidence for the possibility of *fore* meaning “in preference to” (127), although he comes to the conclusion that the precise meaning of the word is “not wholly conclusive”; for him, the ambiguity, in line with my own argument, establishes “some complexity of tone” (128). In any case, either translation supports that the birds can be seen as a replacement for human companionship, and that this not necessarily be negative. Jacobs, 127-8 [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Magennis, 204. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Neville, in fact, translates *hleoþor* as “laughter”. Neville, 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Lacey and Poole, 9. The authors suggest the whimbrel as the owner of *sweg*. For *hearpan sweg*, see, e.g., *Beowulf*, 3023b. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. E.g., *sang* “song”, a term applied to human or angelic vocal production as well as that of birds or animals. See Bosworth and Toller, s.v. *sang*, 1 (a) and (b). [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Stanton, 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Bosworth and Toller, s.v. *sweg*, 2(a) and *bi-gellan*. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Stanton, 39 [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. E.g., gulls, although not the species directly related to men’s *hleahtor*, are well-known for their distinctive laugh-type calls. The herring gull has a proverbial laughing-type cackle transcribed as “kyow” or “gagagag” in Cramp,vol. 1, 745. *Mæw* was the native term for the generic gull, in common use up until the 17th century, and is presumed to imitate the yelping made by many species. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Bosworth and Toller, s.v. *on-cweðan*, 1 and 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. For discussion of *þæt*, and the possibility that *bigeal* is a sound specifically aimed *at* a referent, see Gordon, 36, n. 24. Some critics view the *isigfeþera*/*urigfeþra* collocation with suspicion. See ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Neville, 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Braidotti, 528. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. The most well-known of these studies is by Clemoes, in which he suggests the likes of Alcuin, Ambrose and Boethius as possible influences. See also, Salmon, Diekstra, Hultin. For general discussion, see Sanmark, 165-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. North has most recently argued for the importance of differentiating between these cognitive entities, and I accept his recommendation that *hyge* indicates an “aim” or “purpose”, which guides the reconnaissance flight of the *modsefa* “mood-sense”, and its return to urge the body and soul to follow suit. North, 15-21 [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Hultin, 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Diekstra, 433. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. See e.g., Pilch, especially at 128-31. See also, though, an eighth-century Latin versified birds’ voices list, *De cantibus avium*, which mentions how *cuculus cantans scottos iter ire perurget* “the singing cuckoo drives off the companion to go on the journey”. For date, see Marovich, 401. I am grateful to Virginia Kingsley Jones for assistance with the translation of Latin above. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Anglo-Saxon knowledge of the cuckoo’s migratory habits would have been available in Isidore (Barney, XII.vii.67), and Pliny (Pliny, X.11). [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. See p. 6, n.11 [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. For the cuckoo, see Sieper, 70-77, Whitelock, 265-6, and Orton, “Seafarer 58-64a”; Marsden, 227. For the soul, see Salmon, Diekstra, and Hultin. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. Gordon, 41, n. 62b. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. I do not see, as some do, that we need specify a particular seabird species – it is the characteristic of the general seabird that I see as pertinent. Identification elsewhere of a white bird with the soul (Exeter Riddle 7, Paulinus’s swan-soul; Colgrave, *Gregory the Great*, 100-1) may encourage us to identify with more typical seabird species, most of which in the early passage are, of course, white (*ylfete*, *ganet*, *mæw*, *stearn*). The *earn* does broadly come under the ‘seabird’ category, however, because of its breeding and hunting habitat (it is commonly named the sea-eagle in modern terminology), and the adult, at least, has a white tail and is characteristically pale in colour overall, unlike the very dark juvenile. On the evidence of the flier’s *gifre ond grædig* desire, North recommends specifically, in contrast to my focus on whiteness, that “Most likely it [*anfloga*] is meant to come in the black shape of a predator”. North, 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Bosworth and Toller note that *ofer* with the accusative occurs “generally with the idea of movement”. Bosworth and Toller, s.v. *ofer*, 2, esp. 1 and 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. These stages of succeeding flights might be complicated by a further example – when the body is finally reunited with the soul on Judgement Day. For a ‘doomsday’ interpretation, see Smithers. On the relationship of body and soul in Anglo-Saxon thought, see the two versions of *Soul and Body* poem and Exeter Riddle 43. The typical master/servant relationship is implied in *The Seafarer* if we imagine that it is, in fact, the masterful soul itself that ventures out and returns to urge the body. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. North, 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Latin and translation cited in Amsler, 49. In relation to Augustinian allegory, Juan Camilo Conde Silvestre and Juan Carlos Conde Silvestre suggest that “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”, thus “account[ing] for the validity of both the literal and the allegorical interpretations”. Conde Silvestre, 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. Stanley, 453. Stanley’s point (as when he states that “the thought gives the flower”) is that in medieval perceptions the figurative dominates over any sense of empiricism. The birds of *The Seafarer* suggests otherwise. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)