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NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE IN

*BEOWULF*

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To my father

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S.E.C.

## Chapter One

### INTRODUCTORY CONSIDERATIONS

The greatest problem for the critic in dealing with *Beowulf* lies not within the poem itself, but in finding an appropriate methodology by which he can apply himself to it. Ultimately, after the stresses of attempting to apply a variety of modern methods of criticism to the poem, most critics resort to an unfortunate eclecticism. All recent trends in literary criticism, if applied exclusively, seem to set up a filter between the poem and its reader. Some approaches allow new perspectives and some merely blind the critic. In this study the reader will, I hope, become aware of a struggle to find the appropriate critical stance for dealing with so distant, unique and indeed, mysterious a work as *Beowulf*. In some instances I have found it useful to apply, at least partially, modern methodologies with, I hope, useful results. It is interesting to note that probably the most influential study of the poem was done by J.R.R. Tolkien in 1936<sup>1</sup>, a scholar whose stance could best be defined as intuitive and impressionistic. Undoubtedly any study of *Beowulf* still depends heavily on intuition, but in this thesis I shall attempt to apply a more definitive approach, and in so doing, try to demonstrate that many aspects of the poem intuitively felt, do have a perceptible technical base.

There is at least one passage in the poem which gives the modern reader an insight into the kind of poetic criteria which might have been applied to *Beowulf* by its original audience:

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1 J.R.R. Tolkien, 'Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, XXII (1936), 245-295, rpt. in Lewis E. Nicholson, ed., *An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism*, (Indiana: Notre Dame Univ. Press, 1963), pp. 51-103. Hereafter cited as *ABC*.

*guma gilphlaeden, gidda gemyndig,*  
*sē ðe ealfela ealdgesegena*  
*worn gemunde, word oþer fand*  
*sōðe gebunden; secg eft ongan*  
*sīð Bēowulfes snyttrum styrian,*  
*ond on spēd wreccan spel gerāde,*  
*wordum wrixlan ...* (11. 868-874)

Such is the vision of one Anglo-Saxon *scop* of another. The fine poet of Hrothgar's court is not merely a man of status, well-versed in tradition and entertaining, but above all, is a man of skill, knowing what is apt, a craftsman of intelligence and control. These are the criteria which the *Beowulf* poet chooses in positive evaluation of one engaged in the same profession. The emphasis, not unnaturally, falls upon the technicalities of poetic craftsmanship, and three major factors emerge from the critical judgement:

- (a) appreciation of the remarkable assimilation of legend and tradition,
- (b) admiration of the ability to create a new tale from the old, and
- (c) a healthy awareness of narrative and poetic artistry.

The modern reader might do well to analyse and evaluate *Beowulf* in terms of these principles, for within them, in my view, lies a valid critical context of the poem. Sadly, we are not in a position to make effective use of either (a) or (b), for we have long lost the corpus of *ealdgesegena* on whose foundation the poem undoubtedly stands. Secondly, there is nothing in Old English literature quite like *Beowulf* to serve as a truly meaningful comparison.

It would seem wise then to approach the poem in terms of the one criterion still accessible to us, that of technique. Yet this remaining path is not without its dangers. We have evolved, thanks to the accessibility over many centuries of developments and experiments in the literary world, a formidable array of critical equipment, not all of which however can justifiably be used in the field of Old English.

My desire is to show that *Beowulf's* artistry lies not in the criteria whereby it is readily judged, but on a far more simple level. The poem must be seen within its ethos as a product of the minds of a poet and audience accustomed to oral mediums. It is a tribute, but probably an accident, that the poem should have given rise to controversies regarding literary concepts such as 'cyclical patterning', 'back reference', etc. Although these things may be seen to exist within the poem, an improper emphasis is put upon them by the academic and highly literate audience *Beowulf* now enjoys. We need to look afresh at the poem, listening constantly to the poet's voice and attempting to place ourselves in the position of the intended audience.

Tolkien's vast abstract view of the poem<sup>2</sup> is appealing, but is perhaps an anachronism. The atmosphere and essence that he defines I accept unequivocally, but his concept of 'balance in opposition' may be a product of an eye accustomed to constant back reference and slow, close reading— the mind of the person of letters today.

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2 Tolkien, 'The Monsters and the Critics', *ABC*.

It cannot be denied that echoes and recurring motifs appear constantly<sup>3</sup>, but these may form part of the progression of the poem rather than functioning as overt devices. They appear to rise out of the subject in hand, in obeisance to some convention or to the poet's intuition, and may be regarded as evidence of single authorship rather than conscious literary artistry.

Frequently unity is ardently proposed<sup>4</sup>, but again it is not advisable to allow this to progress to extremes. It is another modern academic fetish. Unity does indeed occur in early literature, notably in the ballade, but usually in genre of a compact nature. *Beowulf* is not compact. It is diffuse and progressive. Typically it is a product of the oral mode. It lies very close to drama in genre, wherein the repetition of motifs is often of such vital importance. Its sequence, although diffuse and more inclusive than drama, is essentially a tragic one. The reaction against regarding the poem as artefact<sup>5</sup> has gone beyond its premise and the aesthetic point of

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3 The recurring flame, which appears at climactic moments is such a motif, e.g. l. 727, *ligge gelicost* - at Grendel's entry into Heorot; l. 1516, *fȳrlēoht geseah, blācne lēoman* - in the submerged cave of Grendel's mother; and l. 3125, *ǣledlēoman* - during the exploration of the dragon's barrow. The flame inevitably appears during discussion of the feud and funerals.

4 Arthur G. Brodeur, 'The Structure and the Unity of *Beowulf*', *PMLA*, LVIII (1953), 1183-1195. Arthur E. du Bois, 'The Unity of *Beowulf*', *PMLA*, XLIX (1934), 374-405. H.L. Rogers, 'Beowulf's Three Great Fights', *Review of English Studies*, VI (1955), 339-355, rpt. *ABC*.

5 Although this attitude adversely affected the literary status of the poem, it produced some of the most lastingly valuable scholarship, notably R.W. Chambers's *Beowulf: An Introduction to the Study of the Poem with a Discussion of the Stories of Offa and Finn* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press: 1921), third ed. with a supplement by C.L. Wrenn (1959).

view frequently extends beyond the limits of the poem. *Beowulf* is a sociological document; its fascination is with the workings of a culture. Neither the hero nor the monsters are the central concern. The subject of the poem, as the poet explicitly states, is the glory and heroism of days gone by. He then proceeds to reveal the nature of that glory, its setting, its noble futility and its pathos.

If this central concept is borne in mind, the poem does not fall into two disjointed sections at line 2200. It simply progresses to the next stage in its discussion of a lost *Zeitgeist*. Although the digressions do constitute a break in the plot, they fuse perfectly with the central idea. They function as a reflection upon the action and the characters of the main narrative thread, allowing the poet opportunities for ironic and tragic comment upon a past world - and the opportunity of restating the emphasis of his poem. It is a state of mind and the situations which this generates, that he is studying. Perhaps because the poet maintains the stance of an outsider throughout the poem, some distance exists between the *exemplum* and the 'statement'. The central ideas are vested in a core of legend and history, but the themes (or the poet's maxims) emerge only by a process of allusion, not by explicit comment. The glory of the lost heroic age is always given overt attention, but the frailties and futilities of the ethos are revealed by a play in parallelism and contrast between the main narrative thread and the digressions. In this way the seemingly 'outer' material is in fact a most vital constituent of the integral life of the poem.

I hope to demonstrate in this study how I have come to hold these convictions regarding *Beowulf*. First an approach through the more technical problems of the poem can elucidate many of its mysteries. *Beowulf* is a complex work, which seems to the modern audience to contain peculiar irregularities, in terms of their expectations of the nature and mechanics of poetry. It has become, by the process of history, a thing foreign to the critic of English literature and needs to be examined from its very roots. Before the critic can apply himself to an analytical reading of the poem, he must first decide upon what kind of object it is which he surveys. He needs to define an applicable range of equipment with which to deal with the work. One way to achieve this end is to examine the mode of being of *Beowulf*, how it came to exist, and how it can be classified. This I will attempt in Chapter Two.

Secondly, the context of the poem has to be recognised. Here we run the risk of circularity: the context of the poem can only be defined by reference to the poem itself. However, two useful clues are offered to us within the work. These are an internal audience and a clear narrative voice. Careful observation of these two factors can lead us to a greater accuracy of approach, for today *Beowulf* presents us with three different ages to be considered: that of the internal world of the poem, that of the poet and that of the present audience, each with different processes affecting its conceptualization of events in the poem. If we can define the poet's stance and the difference between his attitudes and those of his characters, we can approach far more nearly the poem's operative system of values. These are essentially the concerns of Chapter Three.

Given the axiom that form and content, means and matter, become inextricable upon examination, my analysis of technique must necessarily include a study of *what* is presented in the poem, as well as *how* this presentation is achieved. Just as the characteristics of Hrothgar are demonstrated as much by what he says as by how he says it, so does the matter of *Beowulf* depend on the manner of presentation. It is not sufficient to present a hero of glorious stature, performing deeds of virtue to create an epic poem. The dimensions, language and structure of the poetry are themselves vital indices of the nature of the subject. So also does the epic setting evolve out of technique as well as data. The fictional world exists within its own realisation. Thus Chapter Four attempts to delineate both the epic setting and the hero in these dual terms. I choose to deal with these two subjects, the setting and the hero, in conjunction, since neither the heroic protagonist, nor his world can exist independently, but each elevates and illuminates the other.

I have grouped a larger section of analysis under the general heading of *Structure*, since it seems to me that one's comprehension and interpretation of *Beowulf* depends more upon one's conception of this than any other single factor. The diffuseness of the work is one of its most striking traits, and the resolution of an apparently formless rambling is the strongest challenge which the poem offers.

Unity is not, in my opinion, a term which can correctly be applied to *Beowulf*, but there does pertain to the poem a subtle cohesion of the parts as a result of the poet's vision. This is an ironic

perspective, sustained by recurrent examination of the motivations, actions and results of the heroic code of values. It is this which allows the segments of the poem to intercommunicate and form a conjunctive entity. The structure of the poem must also have presented no mean challenge to the *Beowulf* poet, who so admired a man who could bind old tales skilfully together in a new and relevant poem.

Chapter Two

THE ONTOLOGICAL STATUS OF *BEOWULF*

## 2.1 The critical burden

It is illuminating, in any attempt at a definition of *Beowulf*, to consider the ways in which it is regarded by its critics. In the field of Beowulfian studies there is often confusion about what exactly the critic has in hand. This confusion persists on another level, where there is a great discrepancy in the opinions of what aspects are significant and relevant to a study of the poem. This is, of course, a very natural state of affairs considering the age of the work and the scarcity of contemporary discussion of poetic technique. The critical world has attempted to resolve the problem by categorising the issues emerging from the poem. The tension of hypothesis has been replaced by a more comfortable range of possibilities and probabilities. There are both dangers and advantages in this approach, which seeks to delineate such matters as the status of *Beowulf* as art, the poem's generic nature, the influences upon its genesis, its sources, degree of originality and whether it is in essence a written or oral composition. There is a danger in this courage that deals so positively with the hypothetical, in the temptation to overlook the speculative core. However, these are ventures both brave and valuable, without which the field would be poor indeed and would have left the enigmas of the work unrevealed.

Pure practical criticism of what is apparently presented to us would undoubtedly produce inferior results. We need to take an historical view and to speculate, if only to assess our adequacy to the task in hand. The pattern of study inevitably becomes cycli-

cal. We proceed from that which we have before us, the physical text, to that which we need to know for a full explication. Thwarted by the mists of history we return to that before our eyes - the text itself. However we return wiser for it and it is a journey that both inclination and good sense demand.

After nearly a century of detailed and concentrated criticism of *Beowulf*, much of it of a notably high standard, it has become second nature to follow the maxims of eminent scholars and to pursue further the questions and problems they have found themselves confronted with. I hope in this study to approach *Beowulf* anew, so to speak; to re-consider why these problems have arisen and review the implications this has for the field of Beowulfian scholarship. No two scholars, in my view, have contributed more to the elucidation of the common issues than Professor R.W. Chambers<sup>1</sup> and Frederick Klaeber<sup>2</sup>, so providing the critical world with an excellent working background to the poem. In re-examining the essence of long-standing questions I do not propose, once again, to put to the test esteemed judgements such as theirs, but rather to consider afresh why the nature of the work initially advanced these questions and how far we can safely venture in answering them.

How can *Beowulf* be defined? Firstly its readily discoverable metric patterning has shown it to be poetry, a candidate for the corpus of

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1 Chambers, *Beowulf: An Introduction*.

2 Fr. Klaeber, *Beowulf and The Fight at Finnsburg*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Heath & Co.: 1950).

art. *Beowulf* has not always been afforded recognition as a work of art, yet it was those who tended to bring narrow, prescriptive and evaluative attitudes to a reading of the poem who preferred to view it as artefact. Such pursuit of *Beowulf* as an historical curiosity can in fact be rewarding in itself, providing textual analysts, literary historians and even historians and sociologists with a strenuous gymnasium. However at the same time it burdens the literary critic with an artificial barrier between himself and the artistry of *Beowulf*. Although remnants of this approach persist, the literary critic is no longer obliged to justify his study of *Beowulf* as art. It should be kept in mind that this happy circumstance is the result less of intrinsic recognition of the work's artistic value, than to modified attitudes in the critical world. The establishment of critical analytic procedures, as opposed to socio-historical, aesthetic and moral evaluative schools has permitted, indeed demanded, close reading and a fresh assessment of the text. The modern stance allows the critic to come to the work afresh. Obviously rational appreciation and discreet selection of early scholarship can only enhance his capability, but it is the rebellious individuality of the modern critic that has released Beowulfian scholarship from conclusive and exclusive classification of the work as ancient, irrelevant, simple and without true literary value. The development of the more rational and less prescriptive attitude is easily demonstrable. W.P. Ker asserted in 1904 that:

The fault of *Beowulf* is that there is nothing much in the story. ... It is too simple ... But the great beauty, the real value of *Beowulf* is in its dignity of style. In

construction it is curiously weak, in a sense preposterous; ... The thing itself is cheap; ...<sup>3</sup>

Tolkien in 1936 was faced with the burden of exploding these firmly held beliefs and was led to suggest in reply that:

The high tone, the sense of dignity, alone is evidence in *Beowulf* of the presence of a mind lofty and thoughtful. It is, one would have said, improbable that such a man would write more than three thousand lines (wrought to a high finish) on matter that is really not worth serious attention; that remains thin and cheap when he has finished with it.<sup>4</sup>

In 1968 Hakan Ringbom made an appeal for modified close-reading to be applied to *Beowulf*:

Before passing evaluative judgements on a text we should try to establish its purport. Even if the result is only a reader's hypothetical reconstruction of what the author wanted his text to communicate, such a reconstruction by close analysis will be of value in itself - provided that the analysis is sufficiently evidenced and that the scholar is aware of the basic distinction between now-meaning and then-meaning.<sup>5</sup>

Literary criticism of *Beowulf* in these terms perhaps owes its greatest debt to Professor Tolkien for his revolutionary treatise '*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*'<sup>6</sup>, which altered the nature of interest in the poem radically from self-righteous evaluation and antiquarian

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3 W.P. Ker, *The Dark Ages* (Edinburgh and London: Blackwood, 1904), pp. 252-253.

4 Tolkien, '*Monsters and Critics*', *ABC*, p. 61.

5 Hakan Ringbom, '*Studies in the Narrative Technique of Beowulf and Lawman's Brut*', *Acta Academiae Aboensis, Ser. A, Humaniora*, 36, No. 2 (1968), p. 13.

6 Tolkien, *ABC*, p. 51 ff.

curiosity to an empirical quest. The paper was both a catalyst in, and a product of a changing critical climate.

## 2.2 Genre: the difficulties of classification

Literary criticism has tended to become increasingly definitive since 1936 and Tolkien's approach through personal aesthetic sensitivity has been replaced by a greater objectivity. It is readily apparent that it was quality of mind, rather than method which produced Tolkien's achievement, for aestheticism failed miserably when applied to *Beowulf* by lesser hands. It led even Tolkien to the following interesting pronouncement:

We must dismiss, of course, from mind the notion that *Beowulf* is a 'narrative poem' that it tells a tale, or intends to tell a tale sequentially<sup>7</sup>.

Firstly, a tale is narrative, whether sequential or not, and further *Beowulf* certainly does tell a tale. It is nothing if not basically a history of an heroic life, told by a remarkably easily identifiable narrative voice, and as Kellogg and Scholes suggest:

For writing to be narrative no more and no less than a teller and a tale are required.<sup>8</sup>

However, my primary argument against Tolkien's statement is more general than particular to its actual claim, which is explicable simply in terms of a different conception of the nature of narrative. I wish rather to emphasise that generic distinctions cannot

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<sup>7</sup> Tolkien, *ABC*, p. 81.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 4.

be applied to *Beowulf* in exclusive terms. The generic categories that we have derived are based on a wide, diverse and accumulative study of literature (usually without any consideration of *Beowulf* itself). It is not surprising that *Beowulf* does not 'fit', yet it is for this reason that the poem is so frequently termed 'enigmatic'. What is really required is an admission that our tools are inadequate to the task.

Faced with this state of affairs, scholars have often embarked on a search of sources and influences, hoping to define *Beowulf* in terms of these. One such is the thesis of parallelism between *Beowulf* and the *Aeneid*. Haber<sup>9</sup> cites the broad similarities between the two poems as : family consciousness, non-chronological time sequences, heroism, the concept of Fate, the giving of gifts and the use of euphemism, metaphor and kenning. All of these, apart from the second, can I think, be explained in terms of sociology and linguistics. Haber's second point should be kept in perspective, for a considerable portion of the Old English poetic corpus reveals non-chronological time patterns and it would seem unsafe to propose a pervading influence by the *Aeneid*.

Chambers, although he claims that 'influence may have been none the less effective for being indirect', admits of speculation in this realm:

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9 Tom Burns Haber, *A Comparative Study of the Beowulf and the Aeneid* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1931).

... though we are often struck by the likeness in spirit and plan, it must be allowed that there is no tangible or conclusive proof of borrowing.<sup>10</sup>

This is a question worth returning to in a consideration of the genesis of *Beowulf*. Nevertheless, the poem is at no time so like the *Aeneid* as to be classified with it as a Germanic attempt along the same lines.

Interest in the Bible as a generic literary influence is all too frequently dismissed in favour of the more controversial ethical problems it presents in *Beowulf*. Typically *Beowulf*'s biblical allusions are treated with familiar grace, with no attempt at explicitness in denotation or connotation. As Dorothy Whitelock has observed it is evident that the *Beowulf* poet 'was composing for Christians, whose conversion was neither partial nor superficial'.<sup>11</sup> The Bible must have been familiar to audience and poet alike. It is in fact possible that the epic narrative mode of the Bible exerted an influence on *Beowulf*. Like the previous thesis this may assist in understanding but is still too speculative to be of great value to description *per se*.

A more popular, and at the same time more illusive proposed influence on *Beowulf*, is that of the traditional formulaic songs. This scarcely refutable hypothesis contributes primarily to the understanding of

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10 Chambers, *Introduction*, p. 300.

11 Dorothy Whitelock, *The Audience of Beowulf* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951), p. 5.

*Beowulf's* metrical patterning and the efficiency of its mnemonic devices.

The ultimate value of these proposals amounts to allowing us to regard *Beowulf* as something that seems to have suffered some oral and some literary influence; a conclusion which is not surprising and really only brings us one small step closer to the description of the work. It would thus appear most profitable to return to the safe harbour of our initial, broad and readily verifiable distinction of *Beowulf* as narrative poetry and attempt another course.

Tolkien has said further:

We must now view this poem as in intention and exciting narrative or a romantic tale.<sup>12</sup>

and:

*Beowulf* is not epic ... it is an heroic-elegiac poem.<sup>13</sup>

Whether or not the poet intended *Beowulf* to be exciting would be difficult to assess, but exciting it is. It seems improbable that the original audience, presumably admirers of heroism and believers in manifestations of evil, would have remained contemplative and melancholy through passages such as the superb climax of Grendel's last approach to Heorot! Also it seems dangerous to deny *Beowulf* at least a qualified title of 'epic', for it does have extensive proportion in ideas, action, characters, length and diction.

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12 Tolkien, *ABC*, p. 83.

13 Tolkien, *ABC*, p. 85.

There are certain elements to be found in *Beowulf* which are surprising within the epic genre, of which Tolkien is particularly aware. However, 'epic' is a notoriously ill-defined category, in which the student's expectations modify with the acquaintance of each newly read epic. At least part of the problem is that it is necessary to step outside English literature in order to establish even the most basic of criteria for definition, for epics are relatively rare. This results in widely disparate poems from a variety of backgrounds being brought together for comparison. The number of observable criteria for categorizing epic is quite remarkable under the circumstances, and considerable justification can be found for linking works as remote as the *Chanson de Roland*, the *Aeneid*, *Piers Plowman*, *Paradise Lost*, *The Odyssey*, the *Divine Comedy* and the *Faerie Queene* together, at least in basic terms.<sup>14</sup>

A greater clarity on the nature of the genre can be achieved by the application of C.S. Lewis's distinction between primary and secondary epic.<sup>15</sup> Primary epic shares many characteristics with later, secondary epic, but differs most particularly in subject and style. Lewis finds 'solemnity'<sup>16</sup> a vital trait in epic and emphasises the festal, ritualistic, courtly nature of early epic. Secondary epic must rely more heavily on style and the grandeur of subject matter, while primary epic is able to sustain its elevated, serious and

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14 E.M.W. Tillyard, *The English Epic and Its Background* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966).

15 C.S. Lewis, *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1942).

16 Lewis, pp. 16 and 39.

noble proportions with its intrinsic concerns. With primary epic, the emphasis on etiquette, virtue and heroic behaviour that epic demands is inherent in the action. The legendary and ritualistic aspects are part of its subject matter and give rise naturally to epic rhetoric and elaboration.

*Beowulf* seen in the light of other early epics, particularly Homeric epics, finds its place quite readily amongst them in Lewis's terms. It is difficult to refute unequivocally *Beowulf's* classification as epic. Apart from the qualities mentioned above, it is a poem of high dignity, rich in poetic diction. It is leisurely and extended. It is strongly moralistic. It centres around 'strange adventures and fierce contests'<sup>17</sup>, and above all, it has a protagonist of heroic proportions involved in epic struggles.

Nevertheless, this categorizing of *Beowulf* should, I feel, only be adhered to in as far as it illuminates the poem further. Once the critic becomes prescriptive and begins to be surprised by unusual features he encounters in *Beowulf*, which do not fit the epic mould, the classification has become a hindrance. Worse are 'revolutionary' readings of *Beowulf*, in which the bold reader, very often the intrepid undergraduate, finds some few features which convince him that *Beowulf* is 'Gothic', or 'a thriller', or (one more frequently encountered) 'an allegory'.

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17 W.W. Lawrence, *Beowulf and Epic Tradition* (New York : Harvard Univ. Press, 1928), p. 8.

In Abercombe's interesting essay on epic, which was written in 1914 and is very revealing of the critical problems of the time, he notes that:

Rigid definitions in literature are, however, dangerous. At bottom, it is what we feel, not what we think, that makes us put certain poems together and apart from others; and feelings cannot be defined, but only related. If we define a poem we say what we think about it; and that may not sufficiently imply the essential thing the poem does for us. Hence the definition is liable either to be too strict, or to admit work which does not properly satisfy the criterion of feeling.<sup>18</sup>

This observation is useful in distinguishing two modes of thought. Definition is intellectual, whereas non-definition belongs to the realm of subjective sensitivity. It is the crossing and confusion of these two modes which underlies many statements made concerning *Beowulf*. It is common practice to apply the 'criterion of feeling' in attempts to describe *Beowulf*. This is understandable, though not excusable, considering the degree of frustration concomitant with a definitive approach. The search for empirical data inevitably supplies the critic with material to support a case for practically every narrative distinction in literature from allegory to thriller. *Beowulf* is heroic, epic, elegiac, it is biographical, historical, Gothic and philosophically didactic. Any exclusive claim for one or even two of these is evidence of prescriptive reading. To say that *Beowulf* carries within its broad narrative framework elements of a number of literary species is about as far as we can go without indulging in subjectivism and impressionism. The alternative is to examine *Beowulf* in its own terms, not demanding from it demonstration of its compatibility with modern distinctions.

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18 Lascelles Abercombe, *The Epic: An Essay* (London: Martin Secker, 1914), p. 50.

### 2.3 The genesis of *Beowulf*

This particular area of Beowulfian criticism certainly depends more than any other upon hypothesis, but it can prove fruitful in a quest for definition of the poem's mode of being. Let us proceed from the single sound definition: that *Beowulf* is narrative poetry. There can be said to be two basically distinctive types of narrative: fictional and non-fictional. Practically, fictionality can be discerned when the majority of the sentences in the work are fictional in nature and their relationship with the real world is implied by means of mimesis. They are 'true' only in terms of the reflection of real world probability, and not in terms of real world actual chronology, personalities or situations. Even when fiction purports to being an accurate reflection of real world events, its structuring and general presentation of them, in being a new statement, is essentially original, and its 'accuracy' can only be tested by real world probability and not actuality.

*Beowulf* is not original in the strictest sense, a factor not to be held as an evaluative criterion against it, as has been done, but nevertheless to be kept constantly in mind when considering the nature of the material it contains. Firstly, many episodes and personalities found in *Beowulf* are not its exclusive property: Scyld seems to correspond to Skiöldr, ancestor of his race who are recorded in the Skiöldunga fragments<sup>19</sup>, Ingeld's history is more extensively treated by Saxo<sup>20</sup>, Hygelac has his place outside litera-

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19 Chambers, *Introduction*, p. 68ff.

20 Saxo Grammaticus, *The Danish Histories*.

ture<sup>21</sup>, Hrothulf is undoubtedly Hrolf Kraki<sup>22</sup>, Sigmund<sup>23</sup> and Finn<sup>24</sup> are well known outside *Beowulf*. The fight with the Grendel clan is practically paralleled in the *Grettisaga*, so nearly that some connection between the tales cannot be denied. I tend to agree with Chamber's conclusion that:

... the *Grettir*-episode is not derived from *Beowulf* (or *vice versa*) in the form in which the poem has come down to us, but that both come from one common source.<sup>25</sup>

Similarly, this principle seems to be acting in the parallel between *Beowulf* and Bjarki in *Hrolfs Saga Kraka*. In short, it appears that *Beowulf* is a conglomeration of familiar elements wrought in a unique framework, its core being the broad legendary corpus of the Germanic peoples. Benson concludes thus:

So far as the evidence allows us to judge such matters, the *Beowulf* poet worked in the way other eighth-century poets worked, building his narrative by carefully expanding the simple kernel of tradition from which he began ... The poet remains a 'traditional poet', for he could not have created his poem without the knowledge of Germanic legend and lay on which he draws to expand the simple story with which he began.<sup>26</sup>

We can propose with relative confidence a fragmentary legendary base in *Beowulf*, which now requires qualification in terms of its nature

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21 Chambers, *Introduction*, p. 2.

22 *Hrolfs Saga Kraka*.

23 *Volsunga Saga*.

24 *Finnesburg Fragment*.

25 Chambers, *Introduction*, p. 51.

26 Larry D. Benson, 'The Originality of *Beowulf*', in *The Interpretation of Narrative Theory and Practice* ed. Morton W. Bloomfield (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1970), p. 43.

and extent. Legend can be said to be narrative, whose precise source and verifiability cannot be established but which would seem to be essentially historical material, repeatedly embroidered over several generations in its transmission from mouth to mouth. Historical matters are verifiable in terms of past world events. Can we propose that, like the modern historical novel *Beowulf* stems from a real world factual truth, and does this affect our conception of the poem?

Whether or not Beowulf (or some similarly named individual) lived, fought dire enemies and ruled as a glorious king, the vehicle for the transmission of the poem has been the medium of oral legend rather than written documentary, subject to vast distortions in terms of increment and elimination of matter in its progress from mouth to mouth. The result is essentially different from any historical fiction written on the basis of, say, the *Parker Chronicle*. It is not surprising, although some have found it so, that we deal with a Hygelac, who fought the Frisians in approximately 521 AD, and also with trolls and a dragon. If the proposition of a legendary base is to be accepted then concurrently we must accept that the base has been modified in terms of the *Zeitgeist* of the eras it has passed through, including the *Zeitgeist* of the final *Beowulf* poet. Any attempt to unravel the intricacies of the transmission of the legendary core of *Beowulf* is an extremely complex and comparatively thankless task, which more often than not leaves the critic speculating as to how well the poet knew the material he was dealing with. Frankly, I see no reason why he needed to be an expert historian, provided that his knowledge was equal to that of his audience. The narrator of orally transmitted legend has licence to modify his tale, yet

always keeping within essential limits in order to retain credibility.

More puzzling and more fascinating than this nebulous legendary base is the degree of artistic sophistication imposed on it. *Beowulf* is essentially different from legend in its intricate time shifts, its careful climaxes, its non-sequential patterning and thematic coherence. It is these qualities that have led critics to search for classical literary influence in *Beowulf*. Propositions of Greek influence are extremely tenuous. We do know, however, that learned ecclesiastics in the Old English period were well acquainted with secular Latin writing. The *Aeneid* enjoyed great popularity among the Irish and Roman monastic orders in Britain. The spread of classical learning kept pace with the spread of Christianity in Britain, and Vergil was held in especial esteem by ecclesiastics, grammarians and rhetoricians.

Haber makes the following observation pertinent to the genesis of *Beowulf*, particularly in terms of technique:

Independent of Vergil's moral teaching the high regard the medieval writers and readers had for his style and diction set his name above all other masters of poetic form.<sup>27</sup>

If Haber is correct in this assumption, and bearing in mind that only the most educated of the age were literate, it would be difficult to explain how a man capable of producing a work of *Beowulf*'s diction and dimension had come to have missed reading Vergil. Lawrence is a little more hesitant:

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27 Haber, p. 5.

We do not know whether any Germanic poem of the epic amplitude of *Beowulf* existed before the introduction of Christianity. It is quite possible that none did exist, and that the plan and general execution of the whole was suggested by Vergil or other classical models - in short that *Beowulf*, like the *Aeneid*, is a book epic.<sup>28</sup>

This is an issue central to any definition of the mode of being of *Beowulf*; whether the poem should be regarded as primarily oral or primarily literary.

#### 2.4 The status of *Beowulf* as a written or oral work

The work of Magoun, Creed, Pope and Albert Lord<sup>29</sup> has revealed the essentially oral-formulaic nature of *Beowulf*. The work itself is indubitably mnemonic and radically influenced by the demands of oral presentation. However, the significant question remains unanswered: whether the *Beowulf* extant was orally or literarily conceived. Did the *Beowulf* poet record the poem at an arbitrary point in its fluid oral existence, or was it wrought in terms of a conception of a lasting work of art, with due consideration given to the literary mode?

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28 Lawrence, *Beowulf and the Epic Tradition*, p. 10.

29 Francis P. Magoun, 'The Oral-Formulaic Character of Anglo-Saxon Narrative Poetry', *Speculum*, XXVIII (1953), 446-7, rpt. in *ABC*, p. 189.

Robert P. Creed, 'The Making of an Anglo-Saxon Poem', *English Literary History*, XXVI (1959), 445-454, rpt. in Donald K. Fry, ed., *The Beowulf Poet: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Twentieth Century Views (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1968), p. 141. Hereafter cited as *BP*.

J.C. Pope, *The Rhythm of Beowulf* (New Haven, Conn., 1942, rev. ed. 1966).

Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, Harvard Studies in Comparative Literature, 24 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1960).

Lord<sup>30</sup> has discussed the difficulties confronting an attempt to record an oral poem and the inevitable distortions which arise, so rendering any written text essentially different from an oral venture. Similarly any singer in an attempt to copy his poem, faced with a new medium and unusual circumstances would ultimately modify his work. In the intention to write a poem down, whether from an oral source or not, the writer is influenced by the phenomenon of recording words on paper. In these terms *Beowulf* is ultimately literary. Campbell has brought the internal evidence of style to bear on this concept of the poem:

... no surviving major Old English poem was composed in the expectation that it would be freely modified at almost every recitation, as is the case with primitive formulaic verse, like that of the Serbian lays. The carefully wrought paragraphs of the Old English epic style were certainly intended for preservation, and it follows that the poems were composed for record in writing.<sup>31</sup>

The hypothetical 'Beowulfs' that pre-existed our extant version are speculative in the first place, and secondly, are different in intention and therefore different in kind. Our concern then is with a literary work, but was this true of the poet?

It is generally assumed that the writing of *Beowulf* was not an end

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30 Lord, Chapter 6.

31 A. Campbell, 'The Old English Epic Style', in *English and Medieval Studies Presented to J.R.R. Tolkien*, ed., Norman Davis and C.L. Wrenn, (London, 1963), p. 20.

in itself, but was in fact a transcription for oral delivery.<sup>32</sup> This is a sound hypothesis, for in an age of expensive parchment, writing was a functionary mode for the communication by the literate few to the illiterate many.<sup>33</sup> This was certainly true of early ecclesiastical prose. However, *Beowulf* is secular, popular and non-dogmatic, and we may not be wise in dismissing out of hand the possibility that *Beowulf* was primarily a literary exercise radically influenced by experience or knowledge of oral tradition.

Benson, in asserting that Old English poetry should be considered essentially literary, makes the following observation:

The tendency has arisen to regard the evidence of formulaic patterning as an explanation *sine qua non* or oral composition by unlettered *scops*. It is the exclusiveness of the proposition that is unsound and crippling. Verse and prose of those creators known to be literate evinces similar patterning in many instances, such as the writer of the *Metres of Boethius*, Alfred's prose generally, and the works of Cynewulf. We are the richer for being able to recognise the oral-formulaic nature of *Beowulf*, ... nevertheless this characteristic does not necessarily resolve the oral/written controversy to any great measure. It merely reveals the power of tradition exerted on any poet, conservative or revolutionary.<sup>34</sup>

Albert Lord maintains a strict dichotomy between oral and written poetry, contending that a man cannot be a master of both simultaneously. Consequently there can, strictly speaking, exist no

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32 Most modern scholarship is based on this assumption, which Stanley B. Greenfield in *The Interpretation of Old English Poems*, (1972), emphatically states as 'the undeniable fact of recitation for an audience of auditors' (p. 30).

33 Ruth Crosby, 'Oral Delivery in the Middle Ages', *Speculum*, XI (1936), 88-110.

34 Larry D. Benson, 'The Literary Character of Anglo-Saxon Formulaic Poetry', *PMLA*, LXXI (1966), 334-341.

such thing as a transitional text. He sees *Beowulf* as an oral poem, dictated to a scribe by a single scop.<sup>35</sup> The fact that *Beowulf* evinces oral characteristics is sufficient to convince Lord that its creator was illiterate.

Hakan Ringbom, with characteristic common sense, emphasises the hypothetical nature of our reasoning and the dangers of building a card house of assumption:

... even supposing that all oral poetry is formulaic in character, this does not imply that all formulaic poetry is orally composed by unlettered singers.<sup>36</sup>

In fact, there is little reason to assume, on the basis of the oral-formulaic nature of *Beowulf* that its poet was the illiterate scop. Indeed, the earliest English prose is entirely indebted to alliterative oral verse in terms of structure and patterning. The influence of oral-formulaic verse was in fact very slow in dying, and was not, as Lord seems to imply, obliterated by the pressures of literacy.

Although it is generally proposed that *Beowulf* was written at a time when literacy was in its early infancy in Britain, while oral modes were still vital, it is not impossible to place *Beowulf* in a slightly more developed framework, when the literate man was relatively common and oral modes were no longer the exclusive vehicle

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35 Lord, p. 200.

36 Ringbom, *Narrative Technique*, p. 19.

for poetry. Scholarship may one day provide us with a conclusive and accurate dating of *Beowulf*, but until then we cannot hope to define the environment by a process of elimination of any elements which are faintly improbable. All probabilities exist in the realm of speculation except the impossible. Ultimately there seem to be three broad categories of possibility in the genesis of *Beowulf*:

- (a) the *Beowulf* poet functioned as a scribe, a recorder of the work of a scop of the oral tradition. This possibility implies a desire to preserve one of the gems of a waning or deteriorating oral tradition, or an attempt to record the work of an exceptional scop for the instruction and delight of a living oral tradition. Whether the purpose be antiquarian or pedagogic, such a transcription of *Beowulf* roots it soundly in an oral corpus;
- (b) the *Beowulf* poet was a literary modifier of an oral base. This possibility implies interaction between an original version and our extant version. This seems a sounder hypothesis, taking into account the reaction of the artist to the phenomenon of writing.

Whereas (a) implies that all the artistry is vested in the scop, (b) allows for a degree of reconciliation between written and oral modes and implies an employment of literary techniques.

- (c) the *Beowulf* poet was a literate assimilator of traditional oral legends in an entirely new and fully literary work.

It is the nature of these three possibilities that they are of far greater value when seen in conjunction with each other, than is any one in isolation. Had *Beowulf* been a prose composition, revealing no definable metrical arrangement, our task would be immeasurably simplified, for prose is a function of literacy and only develops fully when reading habits become relatively widespread. The problems confronting the investigator, or more properly the speculator, of the roots of poetry are far more complex. Just as dramatic dialogue is not concomitant with literacy, so poetry exists initially in oral form. However this is poetry different in kind from that poetry which is subsequent to wide literacy and expertise in prose. Hegel has discussed the modifications apparent in poetry before and after the advent of the 'prosaic spirit':

We must .... make an essential distinction between a primitive poetry, which arises *previous to* the creation of ordinary artificial prose, and that mode of poetical composition and speech the development of which is effected where already the conditions of our everyday life and prosaic expression exist. The first is poetical without intention, in idea no less than speech; the latter on the contrary, is fully conscious of the sphere, from which its task is to detach itself, in order that it may establish itself on the free basis of art.<sup>37</sup>

The essential nature of *Beowulf* and its major debt to the oral tradition is most readily demonstrable when the poem is contrasted with modern, highly 'literate' poetry. Consider Ted Hughes's poem:

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37 G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of Fine Art*, trans. F.P.B. Ostmaston, Volume IV, (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1920), p. 23.

The Thought-Fox

I imagine this midnight moment's forest:  
 Something else is alive  
 Beside the clock's loneliness  
 And this blank page where my fingers move.

Through the window I see no star:  
 Something more near  
 Though deeper within darkness  
 Is entering the loneliness:

Cold, delicately as the dark snow,  
 A fox's nose touches twig, leaf;  
 Two eyes serve a movement, that now  
 And again now, and now, and now

Sets neat prints into the snow  
 Between trees, and warily a lame  
 Shadow lags by stump and in hollow  
 Of a body that is bold to come

Across clearings, an eye,  
 A widening deepening greenness,  
 Brilliantly, concentratedly,  
 Coming about its own business

Till, with a sudden sharp hot stink of fox  
 It enters the dark hole of the head.  
 The window is starless still; the clock ticks,  
 The page is printed.

Firstly, the speaker is not anonymous - he is very definitely Ted Hughes, poet, discussing the creative act within an exhibition of its progeny. The voice of the poet and his personal experience define the very core of the poem. Hughes here is both self-conscious and aware of the type of poetry he tries to write ('Brilliantly, concentratedly ...'). In his autobiographical comment,

... I was sitting up late one snowy night in dreary lodgings in London. I had written nothing for a year or

so but that night I got the idea I might write something and I wrote in a few minutes the following poem; the first 'animal' poem I ever wrote.<sup>38</sup>

Hughes is acutely aware of the act of writing and of the creation of an artistic entity.

Further, this type of poetry is non-explicit, it requires more than one reading, more than immediate comprehension can afford. It is essentially compact and its imagery is closely wrought. Importantly, the imagery is a concretization of the pattern of ideas, which forms the 'narrative'.

In oral poetry the narrative dare not lie so buried. Allusions must be explicit, imagery must clarify directly and thus overt metaphor is far more functional. The pace of ideas, if rapid, needs open statement. Only if the pace is relatively slow can visualization of details be afforded. Above all overt originality is to be avoided in oral poetry. The density, swiftness and the novelty of Hughes's poem is evidence of its place in a consciously non-prosaic medium.

Hegel's 'primitive' poetry desires first to communicate and its artistry is perhaps secondary to this. Modern poetry attempts to communicate *through* art, and by being art. Prose is usually our medium for the communication of history, empirical data and of narrative tale, so that our poetry fulfills a very specialised function. *Beowulf* must needs fulfill the demands of prose, of poetry and of drama.

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38 Ted Hughes, *Poetry in the Making*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1967), p. 19.

In these terms then, the emphasis upon aestheticism in Beowulfian criticism can be said to be somewhat misplaced, particularly when 'poetic' aestheticism is required of the work. Who requires structural patterning of a history text? Who requires artistic unity of a sociological commentary? Yet *Beowulf* achieves all of these, while incorporating to some extent the generic capabilities of these rhetorical categories. This need not be regarded as a glorification of the poem, but rather an acknowledgement that early literature contained in germinal form, the modern range of generic distinctions. We should thus be bold to study in *Beowulf* elements that are the premise of drama, poetry, the novel, the legend, the lyric, the homily, etc., etc., yet be ever tolerant of the fusion of these which the poem offers.

The question now arises of which characteristics of these many genre *Beowulf* unequivocally incorporates and which are an evolution subsequent to the poem. It is at this point that we need to return to direct analysis of the poem itself.

Certain elements are its unique tenant, but we can mount certain expectations general to literature in *Beowulf's* apparent form. *Beowulf* has: characters, action, plot, a narrator, an audience, a structure and a progression. An analysis of these basic elements readily reveals a greater complexity and a variety of unexpected characteristics in the poem. The 'multivalence' of the poem can perhaps be explained by its transitional nature. *Beowulf* has its roots in the oral tradition; it uses oral presentational techniques such as formulae, repetition and alliteration. Yet examination, as I hope to

show, reveals within the poem elements more logically literary, such as its patterned structure. To assign oral poetry, or that which is very nearly oral poetry, to Hegel's primitive and essentially unselfconscious or even unconscious poetry is possibly a fallacy. The forces of aesthetic presentation, of a certain unity, patterning and development are at work in *Beowulf*. Paradoxically then, Hughes, the highly literate poet, has possibly created a poem of far greater spontaneity than any Anglo-Saxon *scop*. Ultimately the oral phenomenon does not relieve *Beowulf* of most artistic criteria. The modern audience is, with certain qualifications, equipped to examine this poem, to understand its essence and meaning, and to consider it as a work of art. Further *Beowulf* may be examined in terms different but certainly no less stringent than those which the critic generally applies to modern writings.

Chapter Three

AUDIENCE AND POET

### 3.1 Problems of the modern audience

Although we may sense some relief in assuming that we are entitled to discuss with security only the work as it lies before us, the hypothetical and the extra-textual must necessarily still haunt us. *Beowulf* is not merely a thing of ink and parchment. The whole work of art cannot exist in fixed isolation nor in pure physical state. To ignore the animate in the work of art is tantamount of acknowledging an electrical source supply but to deny the throwing of the switch. In the words of Roman Ingarden:

... a work of art requires an agent existing outside itself, that is an observer ... to render it concrete ... The work of art then, is a product of the intentional activities of the artist; the *concretion* of the work is not only the reconstruction ... of what was effectively present in the work, but also a completion of the work and the actualization of its moments of potentiality.<sup>1</sup>

*Beowulf*, like any other work of art, can only be fully realised in a co-operation of artist and viewer. Therefore for a healthy existence of the poem, two primary elements are essential: (a) a high level of effective communication on the part of the poet, and (b) an observer equal to the task.

Since *Beowulf* is, as it were, 'fixed', and its 'moments of potentiality' static, the mutability, the life of the poem now exists in the reader.

This of course may not always have been the case for *Beowulf*. The hypothetical *scop* chanting the tale in the hall would have been

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<sup>1</sup> Roman Ingarden, 'Artistic and Aesthetic Values', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. IV (1964), p. 199.

able to assess through responses from the audience before him just how fully his intentions were being realised and what modifications to his technique and matter were necessary for more effective communication. No situation expresses the fluidity of the work of art in terms of audience/artist interaction better than this.

The existence of a stable manuscript shifts the responsibility entirely on the audience. The possibility of a vast range of realisation of the work by observers is obvious in terms of a manuscript as old as that of *Beowulf*. If we assume the most satisfactory and comparatively accurate reconstruction of the poet's intentions to have been vested in the audience that he had in mind, that is, the original audience, our own accuracy should be improved by an understanding of the nature of that audience.

Accuracy in interpretation on a level with the original audience must decline as the culture modifies away from it. It is in terms of fluctuating world perspective that Ingarden explains the changing critical attitudes towards any given work: how it passes through phases of 'brilliance and obscurity'<sup>2</sup>. Paradoxically, *Beowulf* is presently regarded by many of its readers in an ambivalence of both brilliance and obscurity!

Although we have acquired in the course of the last few centuries a comparatively competent historical perspective, it is seldom in terms of a knowledge or even a perceptive assessment, of *Beowulf's*

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2 Ingarden, p. 201.

status among the Anglo-Saxon public of the time that its excellence is proclaimed. Rather the modern audience claims recognition of something in the poem relevant and appropriate to it. These claims are very frequently satisfied by varying degrees of broad generalisation, but the principle of the process is worth investigating.

Francis Berry's article on 'The Modernity of *Beowulf*'<sup>3</sup> is a good example of the lengths of supposition necessary to critics who seek modern relevance in *Beowulf* beyond aesthetics. She sees the Grendel episode as a 'matriculation from private awe'; in slaying Grendel's mother the hero 'cauterises his sex nausea' and then in a world 'flat and drained of its wonder' and 'having shed the capital illusions of fear and love' he 'finally deprives death too of mystery and grandeur'. Berry sees this progress as being in keeping with a 'peculiarly English quality' and matches modern scepticism in its satisfaction with reality only in the observable with the *Beowulf* mores. The process here seems to be one of exclusive interpretation and, as such, relieves the critic of much of the complexity. It is a case of lifting the hero out of his setting and equating him with a self-conscious modern metaphysician.

Conversely, other arguments for modern philosophical relevance relieve the setting of its actors. The poem is seen as an ethical struggle. McNamee asserts that:

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3 Francis Berry, 'The Modernity of *Beowulf*', *Life and Letters*, LIII (1947), pp. 19-26.

Beowulf's conflict with the monsters comes close [r] to that of Adam with Satan in *Paradise Lost*. It has some of the same universal implications.<sup>4</sup>

Hamilton claims that, like the modern critic, the 'enlightened Christian might recognise the hand of Providence and illustrations of the doctrine of grace'<sup>5</sup> in *Beowulf*.

It cannot be denied that *Beowulf* has a distinct appeal for many a modern reader. However, it seems dubious to account for this in terms of philosophical affinity, apart from a perennial fascination for fatalism, with the original audience. To claim that *Beowulf's* didactics may be applied to us with good effect, to assert that a revelation of allegory should have anything more than curiosity value, seems to be missing the point.

It seems that our delight in *Beowulf* at any level can be explained in terms of aesthetics, whether it be the philosophical perspective of the work, its structure, its ideas or very often merely its diction. This would appear to be a more direct route to a degree of empathy with that distant original audience. However, the element of environmental influence on the minds of then and now still prevails, the demands, the interest and even the realisation of aesthetic factors may differ.

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4 M.B. McNamee, 'Beowulf - An Allegory of Salvation?' *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, LIX (1960), rpt. *ABC*, p. 207.

5 Marie Padgett Hamilton, 'The Religious Principle in *Beowulf*', *PMLA*, LXI (1946), p. 331.

Would the early audience have recognized as readily as we do the parallel or cyclical treatment of Hrothgar's and Beowulf's destinies and, if so, what quality and quantity of significance would have been attached to it? Would the diction have appeared commonplace, or merely correct, or would it have delighted? The quality of *Beowulf's* diction and form, which even now is readily apparent, would in itself seem to suggest that the poet expected his audience to be sensitive to these aspects. In the intricacies of both the broad structures and the single line, a careful artist is evident. Thus it is logical to presume that the original audience would be alert to the technical artistry of the poem. However, their judgement upon the *Beowulf* poet's achievement is unknown to us.

Ultimately we do not know what esteem *Beowulf* enjoyed in Anglo-Saxon England. Its survival is as possibly accidental as deliberate. There is no mention of the work in other extant documents, as there is of the popular Ingeld legend<sup>6</sup>. We cannot know whether it is unique in kind or even exceptional among any contemporaries. The high level of artistry which modern critics delight in, may well have been general in the age. Its isolation has left the poem incomparable, and we are forced to remain with its intrinsic qualities.

### 3.2 The academic threat

The nature of the modern audience is obviously a good deal clearer than that of the original audience. The present reading public is

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6 Alcuin's letter to Hygebald in 797.

typically academic. *Beowulf* does not now enjoy the status of popular literature. Its modern audience has to overcome the linguistic barrier of a changed language to reach the text, and even if *Beowulf* is approached through a translation, it is often by some scholarly motivation. We do know enough of the 'Dark Ages' to be fairly sure that *Beowulf* did not originally satisfy this need. For the scholar there were the Latin philosophical and religious treatises. As we would interpret it, *Beowulf* in nature is far more of a secular entertainment<sup>7</sup>. The modern audience of the poem is not so likely to read *Beowulf* in the first instance for entertainment, but rather as an intellectual and antiquarian curiosity. This in itself is enough to produce a radically different reading from the original appreciations of the poem. Demands and expectations must necessarily differ, and the very nature of enjoyment is altered. The most obvious shift here would seem to be the modern emphasis on the manner, rather than on the matter. The fascination with the stuff of *Beowulf*, the progression of the narrative thread is faded and in its place is an ardent response to the handling of material. I cannot help but feel that in this change of emphasis we have lost much of the excitement and thrill of the tale, and with it much of the very real horror.

I should like to examine the impressions of modern critics and readers to discern the emphasis of their appreciation; to dis-

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7 This is not to deny any religious or moral didactic overtones in the work, but rather to suggest that these are not primary: *Beowulf* is art, rather than dogma.

cover where it is at present considered that *Beowulf* has excelled and where it has failed. That most criticized of Beowulfian critics, W.P. Ker wrote that: 'The fault of *Beowulf* is that there is nothing much in the story'.<sup>8</sup> In 1904 *Beowulf* was a tale of little significance. Yet it seems that in assuming a more generous approach or possibly one that seeks merit where none is due, we cannot assert that this was the case with respect to the original audience. Other literature of the Old English period deals in similar manner with parallel topics, for example, *The Battle of Maldon*, and *The Wanderer*. Always the concern is with the tragedy exemplified by selected incident, with the extrinsic tenor of life, and with action within distinct and even rigid delineations of time and place. There is more interest in the worth of the individual to the community than in his personal development. His actions are more relevant than his motives, his duty is more than his inclination. The man is the sum of his social and public traits. In short, the fictional world is far more remote from the real than it is in the case of, for example, the modern novel. A pattern of cause and effect, or any development in terms of an additive factor sequence does not occur. In essence this is Aristotle's 'simple plot'<sup>9</sup>. There is no element in the narrative thread of *Beowulf* to which can be directly attributed the closing disaster of the poem. The causal element

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8 W.P. Ker, *The Dark Ages*, p. 252.

9 Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. S.H. Butcher, ed. Francis Fergusson (New York: Hill and Wang, 1961), Chapters X and XXIV. Aristotle's 'complex plot' requires reversal and recognition, which are essentially causal elements. The 'simple plot' constitutes a linear progression without any assessment of the previous action rendering a new direction to that which follows. Aristotle's example is the *Iliad*.

is extrinsic and constitutes a predestined and inevitable end-product, which is part of the spirit of the work. There is no *hubris*, no *ofermod*, neither weakness nor complacency that precedes Beowulf's end.<sup>10</sup> The pattern of tragedy is simply the pattern of human experience.

The modern critic, steeped in the contemporary traditions of literature, and not accepting the gulf between himself and the earliest critic of *Beowulf*, would demand any work of apparent merit to meet his requirements of logical psychology, derived from the greater body of English literature. *Beowulf* will simply not satisfy his demands nor even begin to meet his expectations.

Pamela Gradon has pointed out that:

It is reasonable to distinguish between a modern novel, in which a strongly thematic element is projected by a mannered plot and strongly individualised characters, in short, in a naturalistic manner as a temporal and spatial continuum and a medieval work, ... in which the theme is projected by exemplary characters and whose structure is one of contrasting episodes rather than a plot.<sup>11</sup>

We are not in a position to complain of the plot, sequence or structure of *Beowulf*. If inconsistencies, or flaws, as we sometimes find reason to designate them, are to be found, we should remind ourselves that consistency was most unlikely to be a factor for consideration in the Old English period. Whether *Beowulf*

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10 cf. Chapter 6, section 4.

11 Pamela Gradon, *Form and Style in Early English Literature* (London: Methuen, 1971), p. 127.

was written to be read or heard, there was certainly no substantial background of a literate tradition where our practice of referring back would have become a habit.

The background of *Beowulf* is the oral tradition, in which it is equally easy to commit inconsistencies as for them to go unnoticed. The criterion of narrative accuracy cannot be applied to early English poetry. Michael Cherniss has observed that the 'criterion of immediate rhetorical effect'<sup>12</sup> is paramount in *Beowulf*, and that the perplexing inconsistencies in the poem noted by modern readers, would probably have been considered irrelevant by the poet. He concludes his comments:

Even if one assumes that [the poet's] method of composition is literary rather than oral, and that he could have revised his written text to eliminate inconsistencies, one must conclude that he failed to revise certain passages because, as a poet composing for auditors rather than readers, he paid little or no attention to consistency in minor matters ... The poet does not sacrifice clarity in his immediate purpose to any sort of larger design.<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, before criticism be levelled at the *Beowulf* poet for his apparent carelessness in niceties, we should consider the epic genre. The style and proportion of epic form is formidable; the epic is an exaggerated construct in length, character, setting and idea. Milton's impeccable neatness in the genre is as laudable as it is rare. Homer is indulgently accepted to have nodded

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12 Michael D. Cherniss, 'Beowulf: Oral Presentation and the Criterion of Immediate Rhetorical Effect', *Genre*, III (1970), pp. 214-227.

13 Cherniss, p. 227.

on occasion. Spenser too has lost his way at times in his vast world of *The Faerie Queene*, as for example in Book III, Canto iii, with regards the matter of Cambell's blood:

Stanza 24

All was through vertue of the ring he wore,  
The which not onely did not from him let  
One drop of bloud to fall ...

Stanza 28

Thus did the battell varie to and fro ...  
And all the while the disentrayled blood  
Adowne their sides like litle riuers stremed.<sup>14</sup>

It is not necessary of course to condone these 'errors', but it is important to realise the manner and ease with which they can arise. In this light the lengths seem hardly justifiable to which critics allow themselves to be teased by situations such as Hrothgar's exclamation at ll. 1778ff.

*Ɗaes sig Metode þanc,  
ēcean Dryhtne, þaes Ɗe ic on aldre gebād,  
þæt ic on þone hafelan heorodreorigne  
ofer eald gewin ēagum starige!*

after the poet's assertions that he and his people did not know the Creator, Lord God, the glorious ruler, or at least chose not to under duress.

There is also the question of the plundering of the dragon's hoard at ll. 3129ff.

*lȳt aenig mearn,  
þæt hī ofostlice ūt geferedon  
dȳre māðmas ...*

14 J.C. Smith and E. de Selincourt, eds., *Spenser: Poetical Works* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970), p. 227.

and the later statement at ll. 3166ff.

*forlēton eorla gestrēon eorðan healdan,*  
*gold on grēote, þær hit nū gēn lifað*  
*eldum swā unnyt, swā hit āeror waes.*

A further contradiction arises in the two discussion of the battle of Ravenswood: Beowulf names the Swedes as the aggressors and the messenger of his death blames the Geats for an arrogant attack. There are also Hrothgar's and Beowulf's differing inferences regarding the imminent Heathobeardan feud. However both these cruxes can be readily explained in terms of political and situational expedience.

The modern critic of *Beowulf* has to remind himself constantly that, comparatively sophisticated as his stance may be, it can only approach to a limited degree the ideal view-point necessary for *Beowulf*. Naively also, he needs to remind himself that he cannot assert that the *Beowulf* poet would be unequal to satisfying modern demands, should he sit to his task now. Perhaps we would prefer a closer look at the hero's psychic makeup, a character sketch of Hrothgar, some examples of Beowulf's good reign, some knowledge of Wulfgar before he is thrust upon us, a closer binding of the main narrative thread with the so-called 'digressions' or a more explicit message of significance or relevance, spiritual or otherwise. However, we demand in terms of a way of thought, a *Zeitgeist*, remote from the poem and its time, which we, separated by eons, are forced to term 'enigmatic'.

Nonetheless our sense of inadequacy, provided that it is recognized, need not inhibit modern efforts to derive and crystallize sound hypotheses and interpretations. As Bonjour has pointed out, despite the fact that we are comparatively knowledgeable about the Elizabethan era, this has done nothing to dispel controversy.

... as soon as it comes to an adequate appraisal of Shakespeare's art, the divergences are so flagrant that the very scene is shaken by the echoes and re-echoes of conflicting voices, raging in ever-renewed controversies of such vigor that, beside them, Beowulfian polemics are models of restraint and urbanity.<sup>15</sup>

Such disagreement generally proves healthy to criticism and is fully justified without recourse to arguments of historical distance. Further, as Bonjour observes '[*Beowulf*] happens to be a poem'. As such its full resolution is necessarily arbitrary, the conclusions of one man will differ from another, one school of thought from the next and inevitably, one era from another in assessment. If dispute can arise it is a positive indication that *Beowulf* is accessible, that it is still capable of functioning as poetry, at least to its academic audience.

There are more factors hampering a full appreciation of the poem by a modern audience, besides our ignorance of historical features and the 'pollution' of our critical faculties by generations of post-Beowulfian literature. The modern audience is further faced with the problem of credulity.

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15 Adrien Bonjour, '*Beowulf* and the Snares of Literary Criticism', *Etudes Anglaises*, 10 (1957), p. 34.

In order to approach *Beowulf* on the terms of the original audience, we need to suspend our disbelief in monsters. Obviously to the modern audience of *Beowulf*, comprising almost entirely educated, intellectually sophisticated adult readers, this problem is of major proportions. We may be able to accept that if we were Anglo-Saxons of that period, our belief in these manifestations of the supernatural would be profound. Nevertheless, we are generally totally unconvinced of the likelihood of meeting one of the children of Cain in monstrous form on the moors of a dark evening. Imagination may bring us to the brink of terror, but rationality and our realistic education will normally prevent us from completely assuming the Anglo-Saxon state of mind. We lack the capacity for genuine horror for such ideas, with the result that we lose a great deal of the tension and excitement of the poem.

Similarly our concept of hand-to-hand combat, military or monstrous, is diluted. Our concept of the tensions, psychic reactions, and even the aesthetic niceties is somewhat inept.

In a field where the modern reader can so easily err, it is interesting to juxtapose a few of the most influential voices on Beowulfian criticism. Gilbert Highet, looking upon *Beowulf* with the Greek scholar's eye, regards the poem as deficient, finding it 'a rude and comparatively unskilled poem'.<sup>16</sup> Certainly it is not surprising to discern a poorer handling of material in the Homeric style in *Beowulf*, but we scarcely expect or even desire a classical manner in the poem.

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16 Gilbert Highet, *The Classical Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1949, rpt. 1951), p. 24.

So are ideas on *Beowulf* constantly steeped in the influence of other frames of reference, or of ways of critical thought foreign to it. Because of the darkness of its roots we seek another extrinsic reference in comparative study with loosely-related works, or we ask the work to oblige our interpretative inclinations. This latter process is not always negative, for it reveals the breadth of appeal of the poem. With all due merit, Tolkien is impressionistic and delightfully romantic, Wrenn circumspectly aesthetic and Klaeber historical. Tolkien concludes generally on *Beowulf*:

If the funeral of Beowulf moved once like the echo of an ancient dirge, far-off and hopeless, it is to us as a memory brought over the hill, an echo of an echo ... it was made in this land and moves in our northern world beneath our northern sky and for those who are native to that tongue and land, it must ever call with a profound appeal - until the dragon comes.<sup>17</sup>

While girding himself with tolerance, Wrenn defines the appeal of *Beowulf* in less patriotic, aesthetic terms:

... because the poet has achieved harmony between his form and matter, between the traditional Germanic culture of the past and the Latin-Christian civilization of his own outlook, we still may feel that *Beowulf* is an artistic unity in a great poem, despite apparent discrepant features in its structure. It is, too, a poem of dramatic speeches and of action rather than of characterizations, yet the images of its hero as well as of its principal characters remains vivid and moving.<sup>18</sup>

Klaeber's general comment upon the poem to which he devoted so much scholarship appears in the introduction to his edition:

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17 Tolkien, 'Monsters and Critics', *ABC*, p. 88.

18 Wrenn, C.L., *A Study of Old English Literature* (London: Harrap & Co., 1967), p. 121.

As an eloquent exponent of old Germanic life it stands wholly in a class by itself. As an exemplar of Anglo-Saxon poetic endeavor it reveals an ambitious purpose and a degree of success in its accomplishment which are worthy of unstinted praise ... it portrays stirring heroic exploits and, ... brings before us the manly ideals which appealed to the enlightened nobles of the age.<sup>19</sup>

The appeal here is the aesthetic, decidedly tempered with antiquarian fascination.

*Beowulf* is caught in cyclical cordon by its own nature but no less by the nature of its modern audience, which restricts its life to the academic precinct. Because of linguistic difficulties it is reserved for the lettered. Because of its age and the resultant cultural gulf beyond which it stands, it requires an audience impelled by a degree of curiosity in the ancient. This has unfortunate results in the realization of the poem. Its audience is now, as possibly it was originally, a very restricted one, but it is restricted in a fashion unlikely to have been intended by the *Beowulf* poet. Interpretations of *Beowulf* tend to be intellectual, over-eager and I feel, too plunging. Obscurities are seized upon and either inhibit or over-stimulate the critic. The granting of a poetic licence to the *Beowulf* poet is seldom considered. Most serious is the very understandable modern circumstance that *Beowulf* has become a literary artefact rather than a tale of a past age with its heroes and their deeds.

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19 Klaeber, *Beowulf*, pp. cxix-cxx.

In an attempt at closer intimacy with the poem, a brief consideration of the other audiences of *Beowulf* should be of assistance, for it may at least define the limits of reasonable expectation.

### 3.3 An index of interpretative accuracy - the dramatic audience

*Beowulf* can be said to have three distinguishable audiences, three parties who react to its concerns. The present and the original audiences differ markedly, as discussed above, and are best differentiated each from the other. The third audience is intrinsic to and always implicit in the text. This audience is continually modifying its identity but never to the point of altering its nature and function, so that it hardly warrants sub-division. This audience is part of the narrative and bound within it. It is the easiest to define and the least susceptible to variation in opinion. This audience is the dramatic audience. It is involved, and without the foreknowledge and perspective afforded the other two. Its behaviour and characteristics are part of the action, meaning and nature of *Beowulf*. As such it is not exempt from misinterpretation by a modern audience. It was originally created for the mind of the original audience, the first extrinsic audience of *Beowulf*. It is different from the original hearers in ways so often stressed by the *Beowulf* poet, not only in being fictional as opposed to 'real', but also in its pre-Christian ideal *comitatus* ethos. The original real-world audience of *Beowulf* is emphatically removed from the inner dramatic audience initially, by the poet setting the action in the remote *gēardagum* and further, ethically:

Metod h̄ie ne cūðon,  
 dāēda Dēmend, ne wiston h̄ie Drihten God  
 nē h̄ie hūru heofena Helm herian ne cūðon  
 wuldres Waldend.<sup>20</sup>

11. 180-183

The dramatic audience represents a community of warriors of past days of glory. It seems characterized by the broad inference covering the whole poem that, as warriors and retainers, it represents a breed superior to the poet's contemporaries. It comprises the men who *ellen fremedon*.

This is a familiar Anglo-Saxon pre-occupation, which permeates not only *Beowulf*, but much of the Old English corpus generally. The future lies within a cloud of doom, the past in a glitter of glory, while the present is in character closest to the former. The 'giants' of *The Ruin* are visualized as follows:

... þāer iū beorn monig  
 glaedmōd and goldbeorht gleoma gefraetwed,  
 wlonc and wīngāl wīghyrstum scān,  
 seah on sinc, on sylfor, on searogimmas  
 on ēad, on āeht, on eorcanstān ...<sup>21</sup>

11. 32-36

The philosophy is readily adaptable to non-secular needs. Wulfstan's vision of the state of England in 1014 is of the same mould.

20 Here the poet seems to indicate that the Christianity of Hrothgar's court is not entirely stable, if indeed established at all. The apparent Christianity of the fictional world is revealed elsewhere in the poem. Possibly we are expected here to understand that, under stress, Heorot reverts readily to pagan practices.

21 Richard Hamer, *A Choice of Anglo-Saxon Verse* (London: Faber & Faber, 1970), p. 28.

Lēofan men, gecnāwād þæt sōð is:  
 ðēos worold is on ofste, and hit nēalāecð  
 þām ende, and þy hit is on worolde aa swā  
 leng swā wyrse, and swā hit sceal nīde for  
 folces synnan āer Ante-crīstes tōcyme yfelian  
 swīpe, and hūru hit wyrð þaenne egeslic and  
 grimlic wīde on worolde.<sup>22</sup>

The maxim is applied to the external audience of *Beowulf* who, by implication, are lesser creatures than those whom the poet discusses. The internal dramatic audience also suffers under this vision when the glory of its world topples at the loss of Beowulf. It functions as an *exemplum* of the wider statement of the work, which discusses the dissolution of good in the face of evil. Typically the dramatic audience constitutes fine men, but a far lesser stature than the hero they watch and wait for. That it shows fear at each confrontation provides a measure for Beowulf's heroism. At no point does it reach as low an ebb as during the dragon fight, where the dramatic audience comprises Beowulf's immediate retainers.

Nealles him on hēape handgesteallan,  
 aēðelinga bearn ymbe gestōdon  
 hildecystum, ac hī on holt bugon,  
 ealdre burgan.

11. 2596-2599

Here the dramatic audience performs a dual function. Firstly, it is a foil to and a measure of the hero, and secondly, it functions as a revelation of the quality of men who will be left to inhabit

22 Wulfstan, *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos*, From Dorothy Whitelock, ed., *Sweet's Anglo-Saxon Reader* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), p. 85.

the earth after Beowulf has fallen. Wiglaf's condemnation of the deserters is a judgement upon all men incapable of loyalty, incapable of meeting dragons and so incapable of the heroic life. In the process of the poem those men who *ellen fremedon* pass away and the golden age is no more.

An historical perspective is constantly applied to the dramatic audience. It remains very much part of its world. Any attempt by the external audience to identify directly with it is strained by this barrier. It constitutes a sounding-board and a commentary on the action, as is the general function of dramatic audiences, but the tension vested in it is of the type of anxiety felt for characters involved in a situation fraught with danger, rather than an extension of personal anxiety, a hypothetical fear of the self in the given pattern of events.

As noted above, the dramatic audience does not consist of the same group of individuals for any length of time. In the early sections of the poem it is most frequently the small group of Beowulf's personal retainers, as in Grendel's last visit to Heorot. Often, however, it is grouped with Hrothgar's hall attendants, as when the implied audience listens to Beowulf's reply to Unferth's taunts.

The dramatic audience constitutes a larger and comparatively loosely defined group in l. 2893ff. Those who receive the news of Beowulf's death together with a lengthy oratory are simply the

*eorlweorod*, the army. The significance is not in who is watching and listening, but in the fact that there is always someone there. No action in *Beowulf* is private, the community is always at hand, and the man is part of it rather than an individual. Beowulf himself in two instances only acts in isolation and his deeds are known only to the external audiences. These occur in ll. 721-766, Grendel's final attack, and in ll. 1495-1590 and 1605-1622, Beowulf's struggle with Grendel's mother. After both incidents however, Beowulf presents a public commentary upon his actions.

The dramatic audience can be said to function as an intermediary between incidents in the poem and the audience. It reveals appropriate fear, appropriate admiration and appropriate jubilation, so providing the listening audience with an index for interpretation. The internal audience, although frequently comprising superior individuals, does not represent the truly superlative ideal of the heroic world. It, like the external audience, is a witness of heroism and so offers to the former a point of empathy, or a point of identification. Through the medium of the dramatic audience, the external listeners may be led to a more sympathetic appreciation of basic elements in the poem.

#### 3.4 The original audience

Not all the historical and sociological hypotheses regarding early audiences of *Beowulf* are relevant to this study, but some brief considerations of the poet's intended public might assist an examination of technique.

Dorothy Whitelock's contention as noted on p. 17 that the poet was 'creating for Christians, whose conversion was neither partial nor superficial'<sup>23</sup> is the most widely accepted. The allusions to the Christian frame of reference are easy, light and non-explanatory. Yet there is a generosity for the pagan, unexpected of a new, however vital Christianity. In the following lines,

	<i>Metod h̄e ne cūpon,</i>
...	<i>herian ne cūpon,</i>
<i>wuldres Waldend.</i>	<i>Wā bið p̄aem ðe sceal</i>
<i>þurh sl̄iðne n̄ið</i>	<i>s̄awle bescūfan</i>
<i>in f̄yres faepm,</i>	<i>fr̄ofre ne wēnan,</i>
<i>wihte gewendan!</i>	<i>Wēl bið p̄aem þe mōt</i>
<i>aefter d̄eaðdaege</i>	<i>Drihten s̄ecean</i>
<i>ond tō Faeder faepmum</i>	<i>freoðo wilnian!</i>

11. 180-187

there is a sympathy for ignorance, a profound regret and an affirmation of the preferable psychological state of Christianity. I find Whitelock's argument in need of some qualification. *Beowulf* requires either an audience complacent in their Christianity, as she suggests, or it requires an audience liberal to the point of ambivalence. The first would be monastic, the second courtly, where political expedience might encourage vacillation.

One of the dangers inherent in attempts to define the original audience is the desire to describe one to whom every nuance of the poem would be understandable, all its implications recognizable by each individual. This seems hardly necessary. Shakespeare, who needed to consider his audience very carefully knew

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23 Whitelock, *Audience*, p. 5.

quite well what he was doing in interspersing bawdy jokes for the groundlings with philosophy for the gallery. With oral presentation, as in drama and probably *Beowulf*, the artist hardly expects full attention, understanding and enjoyment from every individual consistently. If we wish to propose genius in the *Beowulf* poet in his handling of audience, we should expect to find him pandering to many divergent levels and codes in his audience. Some may have been versed in the old legends, and able thus to grasp the significance of the poet's changes of emphasis in them, and some may not. Some may have understood the relevance of references to the brood of Cain, some may not have.

Any consideration of audience demands discussion of the problem of literacy. Although Ringbom makes a plea for *Beowulf* to be regarded as a literary composition, he considers the audience as entirely aural.<sup>24</sup> He bases his conviction on Ruth Crosby's assertions of the largely illiterate audience of the Middle Ages<sup>25</sup>, it seems by taking this circumstance one step backwards to propose an almost wholly non-literate audience. It is possible that in our attempts to define the environment of the composition of *Beowulf*, we underestimate the level of sophistication of that world.

We necessarily place *Beowulf* in a world defined in broad circumspection of many centuries. Like Ker, we see *Beowulf* as part of the

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24 Ringbom, p. 21.

25 Ruth Crosby, 'Oral Delivery in the Middle Ages', *Speculum* XI (1936), p. 100.

'Dark Ages', expecting or hoping for uniformity of acculturation throughout those many years. However there must have been fluctuation in this respect, as there has been in more recent eras, and probably one more radical and frequent, as it was an age of individual rather than institutional government. The realm was in effect the private property of the king and he was ever a man, rather than a representative of the monarchy. The concept of the continuing monarchy had not yet arisen. As Halverson points out, it was not yet the time when one could say 'The King is dead. Long live the King!'.<sup>26</sup> During an exemplary rule there would be a cultural blossoming followed by a period of chaos until another great man arose. King Alfred in his preface to the *Cura Pastoralis* gives us a most explicit comment on the intermittent growth of learning in England:

Ūre ieldran, ðā ðe ðās stōwa aēr hīoldon, hīe lufodon  
wīsdōm, ond ðurh ðone hīe begēaton welan ond ūs lāēfdon.  
Hēr mon maeg gīet gesīon hiora swaēð, ac wē him ne cun-  
non aefter spyrigean. For ðaem wē habbað nū aegðer for-  
lāeten ge ðone welan ge ðone wīsdōm, for ðaem ðe wē noldon  
tō ðaem spore mid ūre mōde onlūtan.<sup>27</sup>

We have no reason to deny the possibility of a renaissance at the time of *Beowulf's* creation, and with this a sophisticated audience, including a reading public of narrow dimensions that the poet would have anticipated. Paull F. Baum queries our paradoxical overestimation of the original audience, within our condescension to their level of literacy. We typically assume

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26 John Halverson, 'The World of *Beowulf*', *English Literary History*, 36, No. 4 (1969), p. 607.

27 Whitelock, *Sweet's Anglo-Saxon Reader*, p. 6.

... an audience of listeners knowledgeable on all the many topics to which the poet points and passes, as well equipped as the poet himself and sufficiently able to fill in all that he leaves out or hints at, but *a fortiori* nimble-minded enough *while listening* to, say, three sequences of about 1,000 lines each, to pick up and drop at need the several allusions historical and traditional without losing the main pattern, to adjust and re-adjust their attention in rapid alternation to diverse matters without sacrificing their interest in the principal concern. Could such a listening audience ever have existed?<sup>28</sup>

The mind accustomed to the aural reception of poetry is doubtless more retentive than the habitually literate one, but Baum's point should be taken. It does suggest that the episodic nature of *Beowulf* could be considered its greatest asset in terms of presentation, an element in the poem which appears to perturb its present literate audience. The lengthy sentences, extending their subjects, verbs and objects over many lines, with many qualifying interpolations are a great harassment to the present audience in initial readings of the poem, yet these are peculiarly suited to oral presentation. The audience is held in tension, and while in this state, fed apparently conventional embellishments. When the resolution of the full meaning of the sentence comes, it comes with an impact and a release of tension which renders it memorable.

For example, after the slaughter of Grendel's mother, we find the following splendid sentence:

*Fērdon forð þonon      fēþelastum*  
*ferhþum faegne,      foldweg māeton,*  
*cūþe strāete;      cyningbalde men*  
*from þāem holmelife      hafelan bāeron*  
*earfoðlice      heora āeghwaeþrum*

28 Paull F. Baum, 'The *Beowulf* Poet', *Philological Quarterly*, XXXIX (1960), pp. 387-399, rpt. in *ABC*, pp. 353-365.

*felanōdigra; fēower scoldon*  
*on þāem waelstenge weorcum geferian*  
*to þāem goldsele Grendles hēafod, -*  
*op ðaet semninga tō sele cōmon*  
*frome fyrðhwate fēowertyne*  
*Gēata gongan; gumdryhten mid*  
*mōdig on gemonge meodowongas traed.*

ll. 1632-1643

Here the basic information communicated is that the Geats return to Heorot carrying Grendel's head with difficulty. However, within this simple message important qualifying material is presented which enriches and modifies this message into a statement of joy, valiant pride and victory. Line 1632 begins with the verb which dominates five hemistitches, three of which constitute a variation sequence on the same object: *fēpelastum*, *foldweg māeton* and *cūpe strāete*. The next sequence dominated by *bāeron* (ll. 1634b-1637a) emphasizes the glory of the Geatish band by playing on the concept in another three-part variation: *cyningbalde men*, *heora aēghwaeprum* and *felanōdigra*. *Earfoðlice* standing alone in l. 1636a subtly glorifies Beowulf, who bore this head alone with ease. Yet only at the end of this sequence is Beowulf himself brought into focus. This is done gradually as he is made to emerge from his group of Geats, the *gumdryhten ... on gemonge*. Dramatically then, the poet actualizes or concretizes the hero by focusing on his proud stride, *mōdig ... meodowongas traed*. While the material apparently concentrates on the matter of moving the Geats from the mere to Heorot, Beowulf's presence and the glory of his deed inform the whole sentence. Like a gradual crescendo the poet manipulates his material so that the near-deification of Beowulf in l. 1643 emerges after a convincing sequence of many supporting motifs.

So also do the episodes function in terms of presentation. They do not interrupt the climaxes of the main narrative thread, but occur at points of relative release. These are moments when the listening audience expects a movement, or the development of a new causal sequence. It is a fertile period for increasing the depth of the poem and for expanding its perspective. Instead of totally breaking the tension, it serves to create a different suspense, while the audience awaits a return to the exciting concerns of the hero.

### 3.5 The narrative voice - a clue to irony

An attempt to discern the extent to which the Anglo-Saxon poet employs a *persona* requires a consideration of factors slightly different from those applicable to modern works. The oral narrative places the teller himself in a significant position. The voice mediating between the work and the audience can influence not only its degree of effective communication, but also its interpretation. This, of course, is also the case with drama. It is reasonable to presume that very frequently the Anglo-Saxon poet and the teller were one and the same. With the purely oral, unrecorded poem, the work could exist only in its telling and *persona* and teller fused. Once committed to the written word the teller is no longer indispensable and the *persona* emerges fully. Like the other elements of a literary work the *persona's* potential is fixed, and becomes a factor fully intrinsic to the work.

I have used the term *persona* thus far for the sake of clarity. However, the term 'narrative voice' is, in my view, a preferable one in the case of *Beowulf*, primarily because it is above all a

voice relaying a tale. Secondly, the speaker in *Beowulf* does have a particularly definitive personality. The voice is a medium rather than a mask. Nevertheless the narrative voice does bring to a poem a stance and a perspective on the incidents and ideas arising from the narrative.

As is common in epic, *Beowulf* is interspersed with personal comments made by the narrative voice. The technique does not extend to the point where it could be designated authorial intervention. These interpolations are notably brief and objective. It is quite possible that the phrases are simply present in obligation to the demands of the material. Very often they seem mere formulae needed to balance a line, particularly in the case of *mīne gefrāege* which occurs five times. It is also possible that the use of these phrases is required by the genre within the traditions of Old English poetry. In *The Battle of Maldon*, which, as an heroic lay, has some generic characteristics in common with *Beowulf*, the personal intrudes in a similar manner:

*gehȳrde ic þæt Eadweard     ānne slōge*  
*swiðe mid his swurde ...*<sup>29</sup>

11. 115-116

Culbert suggests that the technique assists in indicating a 'vantage point'.<sup>30</sup> This is possibly valid, but the process to this end is a subtle one. The use of the personal does not imply an emphasis

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29 Whitelock, *Sweet's Anglo-Saxon Reader*, p. 120.

30 Taylor Culbert, 'Narrative Technique in *Beowulf*', *Neophilologus*, XLVII (1963), pp. 50-61.

on the narrative voice, but rather functions as a distancing technique. The times when the narrative voice explicitly emerges in *Beowulf* are the following:

(a) pertaining to delight in the materially glorious

- (i) 1. 38 *ne h̄yrde ic ...*: within a descriptive passage on Scyld's ship
1. 1027 *ne gefraegn ic ...*: giving of treasure in Heorot
1. 1196 *ic gefraegen haebbe ...*: description of Hygelac's circlet
1. 1197 *ic ... h̄yrde ...*: description of Hygelac's circlet
1. 2163 *H̄yrde ic ...*: presentations to Hygelac
1. 2172 *H̄yrde ic ...*: giving of the circlet
1. 2773 *ic ... gefraegn ...*: Wiglaf plunders the hoard

(b) pertaining to military achievement

1. 776 *m̄ine gefr̄aēge ...*: during the fight with Grendel
1. 2685 *m̄ine gefr̄aēge ...*: during the dragon fight

(c) pertaining to virtue

1. 1955 *m̄ine gefr̄aēge ...*: Modthryth's later virtue
1. 2694 *ic ... gefraegn ...*: Wiglaf's courage
1. 2752 *ic ... gefraegn ...*: Wiglaf's obedience
1. 2837 *m̄ine gefr̄aēge ...*: Beowulf's valour

(d) pertaining to heroic life

1. 62 *h̄yrde ic ...*: discussion of the lives of the Danish lineage
1. 74 *ic ... gefraegn ...*: the building of Heorot
1. 837 *m̄ine gefr̄aēge ...*: the viewing of Grendel's grasp
1. 1011 *Ne gefraegen ic ...*: banquet at Heorot

It is striking that all these instances occur in passages directly relative to the *commitatus* ethic: the giving and receiving of treasure, military strength, the virtue of leaders and familial interest. All deal with superlatives. The technique itself seems to embody a superlative effect and enhances the extravagant grace of the epic style. Further, the elements emphasized by the narrative voice as being hearsay are all elements of the past heroic glory which forms the setting of the narrative. The effect is one of glorification of the past and simultaneously, an implicit removal of the narrative voice from that past. The process implies that the speaker has not had direct experience of heroic glory but has needed to be told of it by word of mouth, as apparently, does his audience.

The same method of separating the world of *Beowulf* from the audience's world can be seen in the first three lines of the poem.

*Hwaet, wē Gārdena in gēardagum,  
 þēodecninga þrym gefrūnon,  
 hū ðā aepelingas ellen fremedon!*

11. 1-3

Simultaneously operative is a mutually inclusive attitude in the narrative voice towards the audience. In this way the speaker can manipulate a close relationship with his audience and, at the same time, establish a distance for it, equivalent to his own, from the material. Thus the audience is immediately implied to be remote from *commitatus* heroism and this is reinforced whenever its trappings and values emerge overtly,<sup>31</sup> as in the instances listed above.

31 Further implications of this aspect are examined in Chapter 6.

These patterns are significant in terms of suspense and audience reaction. The intended audience is placed by the *scop* in a position remarkably like our own. Closer to the concerns of the material it may well be, but the stance of the narrative voice is antiquarian. Audience reaction then is modified by a sense of the exotic and the remote. Consequently, any tendency towards direct identification or or illusory participation in the material is hindered. This is very necessary if indeed the poet did intend relevance to be vested in the abstract principles of the tale, rather than directly in the action, which seems distinctly possible. The distancing technique places the action in a perspective which permits a more objective interest. It prevents a submersion of the thread of ideas which could occur as a result of inordinate, semi-subjective involvement or direct identification.

Narrative situation in *Beowulf* is readily describable in terms of Franz Stanzel's methods of definition.<sup>32</sup> Essentially *Beowulf* employs the authorial form of presentation, in which the audience is dependent upon the narrative voice ('the authorial medium') to 'bridge the gap between his own world and the fictional reality'.<sup>33</sup> The audience of *Beowulf* is very aware of a distinction between the realm of the narrative voice (which, in the first three lines is implied as being equivalent to their own), and the fictional world.

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32 Franz Stanzel, *Narrative Situations in the Novel*, trans. James P. Puskas (Bloomington/London: Indiana Univ. Press, 1971.).

33 Stanzel, p. 23.

Thus the authorial medium has an implied identity extrinsic to the fictional world.

Stanzel offers a brief list of the major characteristics of the authorial technique:

... all power of illusion and order seems to emanate from the author's presence in the figure of the authorial narrator ... This metamorphosis of the author into an authorial medium; the recognizable designation of the narrative distance and thus the predominance of the report; and finally the continuous guiding, directorlike, interpretative intrusion of the narrator into the story - these are the characteristic marks of the authorial novel.<sup>34</sup>

The generic proximity of the epic and the novel renders the transference of Stanzel's views on the novel to *Beowulf* logical, and the application of his format can prove fruitful. *Beowulf* obliges the traits noted in the above quotation in principle. However, the narrative voice is not as typically intrusive as Stanzel finds in this category. Authorial interpretation is minimal and largely restricted to the endorsement or condemnation of fictional elements by way of comment. Further the *Beowulf* poet makes extensive use of reports in direct speech in which the narrative voice can withdraw by waiving any overt appraisal of the speeches. Nevertheless the narrative voice does remain the point of orientation for the audience and does influence their interpretation of the actions and values in the poem.

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34 Stanzel, p. 27.

This process permits an objectification of the concerns of *Beowulf*: the audience is forced, by the temporal and spatial tension between the authorial medium and the fictional world, to examine any discrepancy in values. From this examination it becomes apparent that the poet offers a vision of the heroic world tempered with irony. The primary ideas in *Beowulf* concern the inherent frailties of a lost paradise of sorts. One of the major interests of the narrative is, it seems, to reveal the dissolution of heroic glory, yet the narrative voice constantly highlights the magnificence of the past world to the point of intruding in personal comment to verify its extent. The result of this paradox, naturally, is pathos.

Narrative situation is not consistent in *Beowulf*. The narrator poses as a transmitter and reporter of old tales. The greater proportion of the poem endorses this stance. The authorial interpolations noted earlier in this section reinforce the 'hearsay' impression. However, there are sections in which the authorial report of events becomes less convincing. The narrative voice assumes a greater mobility than a report situation can allow. From ll. 710ff. the focus of the narrative voice falls upon Grendel, his motives, emotions and unwitnessed actions:

*Ðā cōm of mōre      under misthleopum*  
*Grendel gongan,      Godes yrre baer;*  
*mynte se mānscāða      manna cynnes*  
*sumne besyrwan      in sele þām hēan ...*

11. 710-713

The narrative situation now becomes 'neutral', as defined by Stanzel as one in which 'the perspective gives the reader the

feeling of being present as an imaginary witness of the events',<sup>35</sup>  
 The dramatic scene in which Beowulf alone watches Grendel devour  
 one of his men before engaging him in battle is not reported in  
 Beowulf's synopsis at ll. 957ff. Nevertheless the narrator pre-  
 sents this sequence within his hypothetical hearsay transmission  
 without any explanation of his sources.

A similar manifestation of the fluctuating narrative situation occurs  
 in the fight with Grendel's mother, where we witness Beowulf's  
 perceptions, actions and emotions beyond the scope of his later  
 commentary. The dragon's temper is also treated with the freedom  
 and proximity that a third person omniscient narrator enjoys.

The fluctuation in narrative situation never shifts so far as to  
 employ the figural medium.<sup>36</sup> This would challenge the governing  
 authorial perspective too far. At the three main points where figu-  
 ral opinions are expressed: Beowulf's anticipation of the Heatho-  
 beardan feud, Hrothgar's sermon and the prophesy of doom of the  
 'Ravenswood messenger', the poet presents these as reported direct  
 speech.

Unity of narrative situation is neither a criterion for judgement  
 of a work, nor is it necessary for the maintenance of the veri-  
 similitude of a work. Shifts in narrative situation however, re-  
 quire careful handling and thus can provide insights into the poet's

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35 Stanzel, p. 23.

36 That is, from the point of view of one of the characters in  
 the narrative.

artistry. When the *Beowulf* poet is dealing with the broad corpus of legend, excluding the Beowulf tales, the authorial medium persists. When dealing with Beowulf the neutral medium tends to emerge. The handling of the Beowulf tales is generally more detailed and more evidently imaginative than the treatment of other incidents. To resort to a cinematic metaphor, the poetic vision, like a camera, pans over the broader spectrum of the poem and 'zooms in' upon Beowulf himself. Whether or not the tales of Beowulf's adventures were part of the corpus of living legends, as those of Ingeld, Heremod, Ravenswood, etc. probably were, it seems that a greater poetic licence with greater imaginative freedom has been permissible in that sequence which has become the main narrative thread. The detail required in these points of narrative focus needs a greater depth than the report situation of the authorial medium allows. The imaginative freedom apparently permissible at these points can admit the use of a third person omniscient technique.

When depth is required at other points the poet employs reported direct speech, as for example, in the discussion of Hrethel's melancholy, where the imaginative detail is supplied by Beowulf. The shifts in narrative situation are not intrusively obvious, but the principles upon which they depend are carefully observed. The immediate effect of this technique is to retain the foreground position of the main narrative thread.

Throughout the poem the governing authorial medium allows the narrative voice to develop its ironic stance. Kellogg and Scholes

define irony in narrative as 'a result of a disparity in understanding',<sup>37</sup> between the tale and the witnesses of it. They say:

Because we are not involved in the action represented, we always enjoy a certain superiority over the characters who are. Simple irony in narrative is often just the exploitation of this superiority.<sup>38</sup>

As we have noted, the narrative voice and audience stand fairly close together at a distance from the fictional world. This intimacy, together with the use of the authorial medium, allows an effective outsider's view of the fictional world to develop. The irony of narrative situation becomes most significant in the gradual *dé-nouement* of the poem, when the inherent frailties in the heroic fictional world emerge to destroy their setting. The narrative voice constantly reveals the dangers to the audience and together with them examines their progress in the fictional world until the fall of Beowulf.

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37 Scholes and Kellogg, *Nature of Narrative*, p. 240.

38 Scholes and Kellogg, p. 241.

## Chapter Four

### THE HERO AND HIS WORLD

#### 4.1 The problems of examining characterization in epic

Initially it must be acknowledged that the term 'characterization' designates a far narrower field in Old English and Mediaeval literature generally, than it does in the case of a modern genre such as the novel. Characterization, is usually a functionary element, not a fascination in itself.

*Beowulf* is not allegory, but it does approach the allegorical mode far more nearly than does modern narrative art, apart of course from that which categorically aspires to allegory. *Beowulf* himself, is as much a symbol as an individual, if not more so. He stands as an embodiment of the heroic ideal rather than as a man. As such any attempt to study *Beowulf* without his epic back-drop would be meagre and pointless. *Beowulf* and his setting constitute a whole and one cannot stand without the other. It is thus necessary at this point to consider *Beowulf* as a member of that internally diverse genre, the epic-heroic poem.

The genre as a whole seems to defy the Aristotelian mimetic requirements of art. Its tendency towards the hyperbolic and its disregard of the limitations of natural probability seem to render it suspect and wayward in a body of art obediently suffused with an admission of natural laws and the frailty of man. However the heroic is not a mirror of life, it is not a record of 'things as they were or are' but rather of 'things as they are thought or said to be' and of 'things as they ought to be'<sup>1</sup>. It extends be-

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1 Aristotle, *Poetics*, p. 111.

yond the bounds of experience and even the credulity of those who would read heroic poetry expecting and demanding a realistic functioning of things in fiction. Heroes are larger than life, the canvas is littered with monsters, gods interfere in an unrealistic manner. Never though does the work amount to undisciplined fantasy. The truth of the heroic is psychic; it obeys the rules of human imagination and remains within its bounds. In this way it becomes mimetic art. It is an accurate reflection of man's imaginative life.

Lewis's distinction between Primary and Secondary Epic<sup>2</sup> is most useful, if not essential, in dealing with a field as wide and generalized as this. The difference in mode between the two, oral or literary, does not offer a significant solution to the problem of the very real change apparent with the evolution of secondary epic. We do not have to accept categorically that *Beowulf* is 'oral' to admit it to the Primary branch. Early epic poetry belongs to an era in which 'poetry unblushingly proclaimed itself to be poetry'<sup>3</sup>. It was never an armchair substitute for experience nor even a mirror of it. It was essentially an ideal world in every way, in form, in diction, in characterization, action and theme. Its very language set it apart from commonality as emphatically as much modern poetry adheres to the colloquial and the familiar. Furthermore it is elite and grave poetry, a tale of nobility for the nobility.

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2 C.S. Lewis, *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1942).

3 Lewis, p. 20.

*Beowulf* is fairly convincingly court poetry. Its intrinsic action and interest never move out of the courtly sphere. It is ever concerned with royal houses, genealogy and the deeds of kings. Its preoccupation with honour and etiquette renders it food for those whose daily concern is with these things. To understand the manifestations of the epic state of mind in *Beowulf* one needs to consider the source and root of the poem.

#### 4.2 The epic setting

We require no mean shift in supposition in the twentieth century to comprehend the essence, spirit and significance of the Anglo-Saxon beer-hall. That place which has become so modified in nature and function so as to be a territory in which to retreat from finesse and from the higher and nicer forms of accepted social behaviour, was once the very apex of culture, a place fit for a queen, where even she must look to her etiquette. The mead-hall was the source of acculturation for peasant and prince, Caedmon to Beowulf. It was a place in which social niceties were acquired, where education in ethics took place, as in the case, on one level, of Hrothgar's moralizing sermon to Beowulf. It provided a setting for gracious living, where a knowledge of the history and customs of the society were learnt. The behaviour of a man at a feast was a sure index of his character, which at times for powerful men trained in hand-to-hand combat, with the flow of mead, must have posed some effort and a most excellent rein! Gentleness and intelligent conversation over the mead was much admired.

Quite naturally then, the hall was the home of poetry and music. The hall is quite likely to have been the exterior setting for the reading or reciting of *Beowulf*, for with its preoccupation with refined culture, it is matter fitting for the edification of those at the mead-bench, and what they would expect there. It is also the interior setting for much of *Beowulf* itself. A great deal of the implied characterization of Beowulf occurs during his attendances at feasts. It is where he does his boasting, where he acts graciously to Hrothgar and his queen, where he is gentle and manly, and where he reveals his intelligence and ability for politics. His speeches are gracious, and briefly to the point - a contrast with Hrothgar which should not go unnoticed.

Beowulf's pleasure in Hrothgar's long moralizing speech is telling:

*Gēat waes glædmōd,      gēong sōna tō,  
setles nēosan,      swā se snottra heht.*

11. 1785-1786

As a refined man he recognises Hrothgar's public admonitions as fitting and therein is his delight. Just as Hrothgar's remonstrations may seem out of place at a celebratory banquet, so too can boasting in a great man seem inappropriate to the modern audience. It was in fact, a required form of behaviour in the Anglo-Saxon hero. Some of the strongest endorsements of heroic behaviour are to be found in *The Battle of Maldon*, where many a boast is shown resolved in action:

*þā gýt on orde stōd Eadweard se langa,  
 gearo and geornful; gylpwordum spræc,  
 þæt hē nolde flēogan fōtmæel landes,  
 ofer baec būgan, þā his betera leg.  
 Hē braec þone bordweall, and wið ðā beornas feaht,  
 oð þæt hē his sincgyfan on þām sāmarnum  
 wurdðlice wrec ær hē on waelē læge.<sup>4</sup>*

11. 273-279

In this facet of the mosaic of *Maldon* we are shown the full progression of Anglo-Saxon heroism : the high-spirited motivation to act, the public expression of this motivation, the physical fulfilment, and finally the heroic sacrifice in death. Eadweard achieves that self-knowledge, the awareness of personal capability that *The Wanderer* cites as a prerequisite to boasting:

*Beorn sceal gebīdan, þonne hē bēot spricedð,  
 oþ þæt collenferð cunne gearwe  
 hwider hrepre gehygd hweorfan wille.<sup>5</sup>*

11. 70-72

Beowulf is able to fulfill the very definition of heroism, and as such, is not only entitled to boast in the hall, but is obliged to do so.

Above all Beowulf is a defender of halls. It is Heorot that he purges and it is the burning of his own hall that he avenges upon the dragon. The hall is the symbol of the security of the society and a threat to a hall is an implied threat to that whole culture which looks to it as the seat of its values. When the hall falls the society disintegrates, as the terse *meodosetla oftēah* (l. 5),

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4 Whitelock, ed., *Sweet's*, p. 125.

5 Whitelock, ed., *Sweet's*, p. 162.

in characteristic riddle and understatement, means 'to destroy a nation'. Kathryn Hume sees this metonymy as part of the poetic tradition:

If the hall is destroyed, the survivor can expect only loneliness and the paths of exile. In real life no one would interpret the loss of a house as condemning one to endure winter weather without any sort of a roof for years ... but that is how the loss is handled in the poetic tradition. When the burning of Heorot is referred to or when the dragon fires Beowulf's hall we should not regard the destruction as a temporary and purely physical inconvenience; in poetic modes of thought, at least, the loss is far more damaging.<sup>6</sup>

Initiatives to action and celebrations of action in *Beowulf* occur in halls. The resolve against Grendel is announced in Heorot, and both the battle and the celebration of victory happen there. Beowulf is called to action against Grendel's mother in Heorot and again celebration after the fight happens in the hall. The resolution of the first part of the narrative sequence is not complete until Beowulf has returned to Hygelac's court and related his deeds to him.

The first two fights are even more closely bound within the hall. Grendel's motivation is focussed upon attacking Heorot, regardless of whom he encounters there. His depopulation of the hall and his possession of it, is a declaration of victory over Hrothgar. However, he cannot approach the giftstool:

*Heorot eardode,*  
*sincfāge sel      sweartum nihtum; -*  
*nō hē þone gifstōl      grētan mōste,*  
*māþðum for Metode ...*

11. 166-169

<sup>6</sup> Kathryn Hume, 'The Concept of the Hall in Old English Poetry', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 3 (1974), pp. 67-68.

He cannot assume absolute control, or adopt and enjoy the conventions of the people he has vanquished. It is fitting that he in turn, is conquered in the territory he has invaded, and yet within which has remained alien.

It is interesting to note that during Beowulf's struggle with Grendel in Heorot that the hall, and symbolically Hrothgar's society, do not escape totally unscathed. The poet is at pains to note that only the very sound construction of the building saves it from complete destruction, although it had been assumed inviolable before. Nevertheless the mead-benches are ripped up and a certain amount of destruction does occur. In permitting a stranger to act as their saviour, the Danish community must necessarily suffer some damage:

*Ðā waes wundor micel,      þæt se wīnsele  
 wiðhaefde heafodēorum,      þæt hē on hrūsan ne fēol,  
 fāeger foldbold;      ac hē þæs faeste waes  
 innan ond utan      irenbendum  
 searþoncum besmipod.      Ðāer fram sylle ābēag  
 medubenc monig      mīne gefrāege  
 golde geregnad,      þāer þā gramā wurmon.  
 Ðæs ne wēndon āer      witan Scyldinga,  
 þæt hit ā mid gemete      manna āenig  
 betlic ond bānfāg      tōbrecaan meahte,  
 listum tōlūcan, ...*

11. 771-781

To eliminate the avenging force, Grendel's mother, she who has no pretensions to occupation of the hall, Beowulf must venture into her territory. Significantly, this is also a hall, a dimly-lit subterranean cavern, yet essentially a hall. It is designated by the poet as a *nīðsele* (l. 1513) and a *hrōfsele* (l. 1515). The

walls are decked with weapons, presumably plundered, as would the mead-hall be. Hume examines this aspect, showing that the image of the *nīðsele* is widespread in Old English verse:

When chaos and violence take the form of a definite antagonist, its dwelling becomes an anti-hall ... often the anti-hall is pictured as a negation of one or more normal hall characteristics, or as an internalization of the usual hall enemies. Instead of being an elaborately wrought and ornamented building, it may be a crude *beorg* or *scraef* ... Anti-halls of this sort gain poetic resonance from their affinities with the grave. The dragon inhabits a burial-mound, in *The Wanderer* a saddened survivor of a hall-*duguð* hides his friend in an *eorðscraef* ... Holofernes is dispatched to a *wyrmsele*, a term suggestive of both serpents in hell and the worms of the grave.<sup>7</sup>

In his defeat of Grendel's mother, Beowulf succeeds in violating this territory, a bastion of the race of Cain, as Heorot is a bastion of righteous humanity. He returns to Heorot with the head and trophies of the ruler of that hall. The dragon too has his hall, but it is one devoid of generosity, which is perhaps the single, most important, trait of the true *sele*. This inversion of the accepted hall *mores* is again defeated by Beowulf, its territory violated, its ruler killed and its trophies plundered.

It is interesting to note that a journey to a place is seldom expressed in terms of the country or the persons who inhabit it. It is home to the hall that every man repairs. The fact that this is not so at the close of *Beowulf* is an admission in itself that with the loss of king and hall, the nation no longer has bonds nor home. Its era is past and there is nothing to refresh and revitalize its values and allegiances.

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<sup>7</sup> Hume, p. 68.

The life of the mead-hall permeates *Beowulf* and it becomes a fitting setting for a wide range of heroic elements recognizable in other epics although the background is different. The boasting hero, so like Agamemnon in his tent, sits at the mead-bench, and the beer-hall is as much a public arena as the battle camp. The elaborate courtesies of arrival and greeting are performed there, for it is the very heart of the nation. Odysseus, on his return to Ithaca, is immediately made aware of the degeneration of his people in his absence. The rot lies within the palace walls and its influence spreads throughout the community. It is in the palace that Odysseus effects the purgation of his people and with the re-establishment of health at the heart of the society, all is righted.

It is significant that in lines 210ff. the overland journey to Heorot after the voyage from Geatland assumes a far greater importance than what must have been a somewhat arduous passage over the sea, not without its dangers. The focus then becomes specific, whereas the sea-voyage is contained within a swift-moving fifteen-line generalization. However the emphasis of the poem lies not so much on adventure for adventure's sake but rather on a man in demanding circumstances.

Moreover the situations which Beowulf is led to face are not only the battles with the monstrous and elemental but also confrontations in inter-personal relations in which he must likewise be

seen to excel. The hero's exceptional personality must overcome the problem that Telemachus voices in the *Odyssey*.

'Mentor ... how am I to go up to the great man? How shall I greet him? Remember that I have had no practice in making speeches ...'<sup>8</sup>

In *Beowulf*, as in Homer, there is a great preoccupation with the ceremonies of social intercourse. There are preferable codes of behaviour and it is revealing of characters to observe how well they obey these codes. It is apparent from the warmth of Beowulf's retort to Unferth's taunting, that some breach of conduct has occurred and that it is of such a nature that the hero is in a position to redress Hrothgar's retainer and return insult for insult without baulking.

To return to *The Odyssey*, Book III, Nestor shows himself eminent in social etiquette in his meeting with Telemachus. His unknown guests are heartily welcomed. Athene is presented with wine before Telemachus, as is meet, for she is the elder. Only after they are refreshed does Nestor point out that it would be 'no breach of manners to put some questions to them'.<sup>9</sup> The codes of Anglo-Saxon nobility differ but are no less demanding. Hrothgar's coast-guard may demand, indeed is obliged to demand immediately, the lineage and purpose of the stranger warrior on Beowulf's arrival on the Danish shore. It seems to stand as an indication of Hrothgar's

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8 Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. E.V. Rieu (1946; rpt. Penguin Books, 1966), p. 50.

9 *Odyssey*, p. 52.

efficiency to find a retainer so bold in his task before a man of whom he declares:

*Nāefre ic mārān geseah  
eorla ofer eorþan,      ðonne is ēower sum,  
secg on searwum ...*

11. 247-249

A similar challenge faces the Geatish band from Hrothgar's herald. To each challenge Beowulf supplies only essential information : to the coast-guard that his blood is noble and his intentions good, to Wulfgar, his name and a demand for audience. Then Wulfgar requests that arms be laid aside before entry to Hrothgar. In all this interplay it is shown that Hrothgar holds effective court, his retainers perform their tasks with loyalty and national consciousness. Simultaneously it is shown that Beowulf is equal to the situation, he is sensitive to the anxiety but he is not intimidated. He knows what is meet and supplies the necessary information calmly, and discreetly contains the real purport of his visit until he is before Hrothgar. It is all a skilful glorification of the hero, explicitly in his behaviour *per se*, and implicitly in the elevation of the setting against which he walks and within which is superlatively competent.

#### 4.3 Mortality in the epic setting

Despite the great religious controversies regarding *Beowulf* there remains an interesting and germane issue which has suffered little examination, that is the influence which a concept of a preferable after-life has upon epic. Homer reveals a phenomenon foreign to

Judeo-Christian thought and to its sense of propriety. Homer's gods at times approach the ridiculous. They are less than the mortals they manipulate. They are generally more concerned with their lusts, jealousies and personal vengeance than with honour, ethics and good deeds. Olympus may be said to be a rather claustrophobic place when compared with the exacting and thrilling arena of the Trojan battle-field or the fickle, fascinating Mediterranean.

Furthermore the underworld is a drear place and the after-life is a twilight opposing the brilliant days and black nights of life. Teiresias in the underworld exclaims

'Royal son of Laertes, Odyseeus of the nimble wits, what has brought you, the man of misfortune, to forsake the sunlight and to visit the dead in this mirthless place?'<sup>10</sup>

There are, of course, the fields of Elysium, but these were open only to the children of the gods and later to the favourites of the Olympians and the souls of the just. As Guirand notes, except for the privileged, the 'souls of the dead, when they had left the earth, only retained a pale reflection of their former personality. Physically they were diaphanous and insubstantial. Morally they were also shadows : their courage and intelligence had disappeared'.<sup>11</sup>

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10 *Odyssey*, p. 173.

11 F. Guirand, 'Greek Mythology' in *New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology*, trans. Aldington & Ames with intro. by Robert Graves (New York: Hamlyn, 1959), p. 167.

It is an essential part of the setting of early epic that life itself should be paramount. The idea of a better life after death is stunting to the concept of the heroic life on earth. The pursuit of honour and renown for the purpose of attaining a blessed after-life is a filtered and less powerful topic. It calls for greater abstraction and intellectual play than would suit the essentially active quality of early epic.

Also the admission of an individual or individuals in the form of deities poses a problem for the heroic poet, striving to keep his hero at the centre. Homer is able to surmount this by making his heroes more noble, more heroic if less powerful than the gods, an idea not inflammatorily controversial to the culture. For the *Beowulf* poet the problem is more complex. That no single satisfactory solution was found is evident from the contradictions and confusion to be found in the poem. Hrothgar's court in ll. 175-184 is one of dark paganism, the same court to whom in ll. 1700-1784 he delivers a Christian oration, complete with references to the Creator and the eternal God. No mention of God is made at Beowulf's funeral though Beowulf's last speech pays him tribute

*'Ic þara fraetwa Frēan ealles þanc  
Wuldurcýninga wordum secge,  
ēcum Dryhtne, þē ic hēr on starie ...'*

ll. 2794-2794

Beowulf's gratitude for God's help in the fight with Grendel's mother is so tardy as to appear an oversight. His immediate impulse is : *secg weorce gefeh* although

... *hālig God*  
*gewēold wīgsigor; wītig Drihten,*  
*rodera Rāedend hit on rynt gescēd ...*

11. 1553-1555

Beowulf does acknowledge this assistance later (ll. 1658-1661) but lightly and belatedly. *God* and *wyrð* frequently seem interchangeable in *Beowulf* and *God* is given a suspiciously pagan function in a rare extended metaphor:

... *hit eal gemalt īse gelīcost,*  
*ðonne forstes bend Faeder onlāeteð,*  
*omwīndeð wāelrāpas, sē geweald hafað*  
*sāela ond māela; þæt is sōð Metod.*

11. 1608-1611

However the chaos does not rankle throughout *Beowulf*. The issue is skirted to some extent, although not through avoidance. The very real dramatic problem is relieved, if not resolved, by a play in emphasis. This can be seen in a review of the references to the after-life in the poem.

The after-life given the most overt mention is that of Grendel. We are left in no doubt as to his fate. He is *helle haefton* and we are told that *hel onfeng his haepene sawle*. Beowulf says triumphantly of him:

'... *ðāer ābīdan sceal*  
*maga māne fāh miclan dōmes,*  
*hū him scīr Metod scrīfan wille.'*

11. 977-979

God completes the job! In this way Beowulf's central importance is enhanced rather than minimised by subservience to a deity. He is

the instigator and chief instrument in Grendel's damnation, and has God in league with him.

Comment on the after-life is not balked at, but is seldom left to stand without implicit qualification and underplay. Scyld is clearly stated to have been taken *on Frean waere* (l. 27), but this is the only spiritual reference in the whole passage dealing with Scyld's funeral and seems to function more particularly as a euphemism. The question of death gives way to a focus on the material and worldly aspects of the funeral and the phrase becomes merely a causative directive for the flamboyant scenic presentation of the last rights.

There is an explicit definition of the after-life in *Beowulf*.

	<i>Nō þæt yðe byð</i>
<i>tō befleonne</i>	- <i>fremme sē þewille</i> -,
<i>ac gesēcan sceal</i>	<i>sāwlberendra</i>
<i>nȳde genȳdde,</i>	<i>nīþða bearna,</i>
<i>grundbūendra</i>	<i>gearwe stōwe,</i>
<i>þāer his līchoma</i>	<i>legerbedde faest</i>
<i>swefep</i>	<i>aefter symle.</i>

11. 1002-1008

Here there is no denial of the Christian after-life but its conventional joys and advantages are never expressed. There is a place prepared for the dead, but it is not to be welcomed. There is nothing to surmount the fear of death nor the futile desire to flee it. It is moreover 'a sleep after the banquet'. Life, even in the partly Christian *Beowulf* is the feast, the pleasure, the effort and the challenge. It is illuminating in this regard to

bear in mind the full significance of the *symle* with its demanding codes and its blend of delight and discipline. Likewise in *The Wanderer* although the futility and transience of material life is constantly emphasised, and the permanence of an eternal deity is offered as a foil, it is only *frōfre tō Faeder on heofonum* (1. 115)<sup>12</sup> that can be expected and no joys that glitter like the frail *commitatus*.

Aeschere's death is mourned by Hrothgar in terms of a loss of a worthy life. After Beowulf's concern for the welfare of his retainers in his expectation of death at the mere, comes his anxiety that Hygelac should see his gifts and recognize his heroism in life. It is not an after-life in the Christian sense which concerns him, but rather that his life be acknowledged as glorious. Similarly, lying mortally wounded by the dragon Beowulf rejoices that God cannot charge him with misconduct in life. He reviews his life and thanks the Christian God for it. Death is a leaving of life and there is no significant forward glance. It is not to the Christian heaven that Beowulf's soul repairs, but merely to the *sōðfaestra dōm*. Wiglaf's comment to the deserters seems, inadvertently perhaps, to express this point of view:

*eorla gehwylcum*      'Dēað bið sēlla  
   þonne eadwītlīf!'

11. 2890-2891

- but a glorious life is better than death. Further, a glorious life assures a man immortality. A man who lives ingloriously ef-

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12 Whitelock, ed., *Sweet's Anglo-Saxon Reader*, p. 164.

fectively denies himself an after-life of stature in the minds of men. Fame is a logical substitute for the Christian heaven and the dishonourable man excludes himself from this.

Heroic poetry is essentially mortal in interest and it is the deeds of life that are vital. After death there is frailty, sleep and darkness. This concept of the after-life is incompatible with Christ and it is significant that in *Beowulf* Christ himself is never mentioned. The compromise between the Christian and the pagan resolves in a monotheistic ideology, in which, however, God is decentralized to a great extent and Beowulf is seen by some as a Christ-substitute.

This is the essential paganism of *Beowulf*. It is concerned with the earthly, with the playground of the glorious warrior in search of mortal reknown, where he must prove his skill in politics and social intercourse. His strength and virtue at this stage of epic evolution is remote from considerations of piety and preoccupations of an easier, more peaceful and happy life after death. However, the concept of reward after good deeds and the concept of judgement is inherent in the *committatus* ethos, and there is no strain in employing the idea of a return to a higher lord for an assessment of deeds done and to receive his care. In this aspect the poet is able to blend Christian perspectives with the pagan-heroic background.

Earlier and later epic do not appear to suffer from these strains. Pagan gods seem more obliging, and later epic takes on a new es-

sence. It becomes more internalised; honour assumes an expression in intellectual battle as well as physical. The protagonist becomes a moral hero, as in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and the issues become more overtly philosophical as later in *Paradise Lost*.

This development can be seen emerging in *Beowulf* when it is compared with the Homeric epics. Routh<sup>13</sup> cites several aspects in which he considers *Beowulf* an advancement on them, both culturally and artistically. Kennings, when compared with simile, he feels reveal an embarkation on an abstract analysis of things. Linguistic games, such as riddling, which is the basis of kennings, show a new 'sophistication in language', which is concomitant with the greater sophistication and complexity of culture. Further the nature of heroism has undergone a change.

Beowulf is like ... more ancient heroes in that he too seeks his true reward in fame and feels that life is too short to spend ignobly. But his outlook and his ideals are higher and less self-centered ... Though he is as zealous in the pursuit of fame as was Achilles or Diomed, he seeks for it in a wider and more civilised field: in the service of others.<sup>14</sup>

As yet we do not have the detailed psychological analyses of motivations that we are wont to find in more modern fiction. The hero is yet the sum of his actions and it is only the fact that these are good deeds and well done which is evidence of true virtue. In *Beowulf* it is the nature of these good deeds that reveals to us a

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13 H.V. Routh, *God, Man and Epic Poetry: A Study in Comparative Literature*, Volume II Medieval (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1927), p. 2ff.

14 Routh, p. 15.

hero of more substance than a military machine, superlative in strength and bravery, or a man well-schooled in social and political etiquette. The battles which Beowulf fights are not against other heroes in pursuit of similar goals of honour and valour, nor against the tempers of capricious gods, but against embodiments of sheer evil. Grendel is the opposition of all that is valuable to the society; he lives in isolation, loathing the mead-hall; he inhabits the wasteland, an enemy of God; he prowls at night and eats men; he uses brute force, not skill at arms; he seems to have distorted human form and to be motivated solely by emotions fitting to the 'brood of Cain'. His mother is similar, yet that curious sympathy which the *Beowulf* poet has for his monsters is more marked in her case. On the whole she is a rather pathetic figure. She is not so much feared; her motives of vengeance for the death of her son and real hunger are more justifiable than Grendel's; and she suffers genuine anguish. Grendel is depicted as

... sē þe mōras hēold,<sup>+</sup>  
fen ond faesten ...

11. 103-104

whereas his mother is seen as enforcedly inhabiting the wasteland.

sē þe waeteregesan wunian scolde,<sup>+</sup>  
cealde strēamas, sipðan Cāin wearð  
tō ecgbanan āngan brēþer,  
faederenmāege; hē þā fāg gewāt,  
morþre gemearcod mandrēam fleon,  
wēsten warode.

11. 1260-1265

The dragon too is the epitome of 'otherness': reptilian, malicious, solitary and miserly.

<sup>+</sup> My underlining.

Grendel embodies those elements which are in direct opposition to all those regarded as humanising and refining. He is extra-societal and anti-societal. Above all, he is the unknown enemy and there is no familiar measure by which he can be gauged. To meet Grendel's mother Beowulf must himself venture into the wasteland with all the horrors it held for the Anglo-Saxon. The crux in which Hrothgar says

*'... ic ne wāt hwaeder  
atol aese wlane eftsiðas tēah,  
fylle gefaegnod ...'*

11. 1331-1333

when the whereabouts of the lair is already established in 11. 844ff., is a re-emphasis of the unknown elements, an underlining of the ignorance and inexperience of the odds.<sup>15</sup> Routh attempts to define the terror which this type of situation evokes\_

Fear is simply the too lively appreciation of your own vulnerability, but terror is a product of the imagination. It arises from things which you do not clearly see, nor are wholly within range of your experience, but which you surmise. It is the shrinking of the spirit in the presence of something whose powers seem all the more deadly because you cannot gauge them, and do not know what to expect. Hence terror is generally concerned with what is abortive, or morbid, or supernatural.<sup>16</sup>

Beowulf's heroism is more than that of the warrior. He has the ability to face that terror so ably defined above. He has the power and the moral courage to conquer the supernatural<sup>17</sup> and the sub-human. His

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15 This is what Cherniss would consider 'the criterion of immediate rhetorical effect' in operation. See p. 45.

16 Routh, pp. 17-18.

17 Grendel possesses a preternatural charm against weaponry (cf. 11. 801ff.).

triumph over the monsters is more than a military victory; it is an overwhelming of what man interprets as sheer evil by sheer virtue. Beowulf's motives may be those of a desire for fame and the repayment of a political debt<sup>18</sup>, but his character, bearing and the nature of his deeds elevate him to a paragon of human virtue. Herein lies a lasting fascination of the poem : the study of the hero's actions becomes an assessment of a celebration of the scope and limitations of man.

*Beowulf* conceives of man as the apex of nature. The primary epic hero cannot be a divinity. He must achieve his triumphs largely by human means. If supernatural powers do come to his aid, it is because he has already proved himself worthy of them, as with the intervention of God during Beowulf's struggle in the cave. The primary concern is with man as an eminently self-sufficient being.

The passage

*oþ ðæt semninga      tō sele cōmon  
 frome fyrdhwate      fēowertýne  
 Gēata gongan;      gundryhten mid  
 mōdig on gemonge      meodwongas traed.*

11. 1640-1643

seems to deify Beowulf quite explicitly. Thematically Beowulf is a saviour of men and of human values. As such he becomes a Christ figure, who at the last lays down his life for his people.<sup>19</sup> This elevation of the hero to a god can only be satisfactorily achieved

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18 11. 456ff.

19 This should not be regarded as a suggestion of allegory, but rather of an archetypal pattern frequently occurring in literature.

if his actions are those of mortal men. Edith Hamilton discusses the dramatic limitations of gods:

No god of Greece could be heroic. All the Olympians were immortal and invincible. They could never feel the glow of courage; they could never defy danger. When they fought they were sure of victory and no harm could ever come near them.<sup>20</sup>

This is, perhaps, rather too boldly expressed, since the gods did have their travails, but it serves to stress the point that Beowulf's glory is firmly seated in his mortality. Heroism is the ability to overcome oppositions too great for the average man by means that are available to man, but which he has not normally the physical and, in Beowulf's case, the psychological competence to employ. The hero is essentially a mortal, who possesses those excellent human traits that other men have in lesser proportions. The hero, if imbued with divine or supernatural assets, must forfeit the human traits of fear, anxiety, weariness and weakness. The recognition that the hero possesses these frailties and overcomes them, is essential to an admission of heroism.

#### 4.4 Characterization of Beowulf

The hero is more than an ideal every man. His superlative qualities are intrinsically fascinating, and even more so is the way in which he employs and reveals them.

As discussed above, the way in which the hero behaves within the demanding format of social relations and intercourse is a tradi-

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<sup>20</sup> Edith Hamilton, *Mythology* (Boston, Mass.: Little, Brown & Co., 1940/1942), p. 308.

tional epic means of elevation and characterization. In this way primary epic approaches the drama more nearly than any other narrative poetry, except possibly the dramatic monologue and dialogue. The narrative voice seldom offers a direct appraisal of the hero and when this does occur, it rarely progresses beyond the presentation of a few, not very telling epithets, such as *haele hidedeor*, *mōdega mæg Hygelāces* or even the extended tribute

*Eft waes anræd,      nalas elnes laet,  
mærdā gemyndig      mæg Hygelaces ...*

11. 1529-1530

These characteristics of Beowulf are already apparent from the action, and the descriptions are merely reinforcements of established ideas.

Besides action, the most effective means of characterization in epic poetry is by speeches offered by the characters, or to them, or upon them. Our first clear vision of Beowulf is through the eyes of the coast-guard in Denmark : he is seen as a mighty noble, glorious in his armour and of peerless countenance and form. Both Beowulf's intentions and his expression of them ally us to the coast-guard's impression. Hrothgar's delight and Beowulf's mien, Beowulf's reply to Unferth, its substance and its style advance the characterization. So that even before the first principal action against Grendel our impressions and expectations are established. The action becomes a validation of these.

The Breca incident is skilfully designed to function as a characterization of the hero, both in its supply of personal data, and

in its presentation. Unferth initially recounts the tale, attributing to Beowulf irresponsibility, foolhardiness and failure - all very undesirable elements for a confrontation with Grendel. The tale is retold by Beowulf, whom we see capable of an admission of the sheer daring of the escapade, but who excuses himself with

- wāeron bēgen þā gīt  
on geogðfēore-

11. 536-537

Unferth's attack offers Beowulf an opportunity to reveal his true abilities, his own awareness of these abilities and his one-upmanship.

Unferth's attack presents sudden doubts to both the internal and external audiences, who have been led to expect a fine man. Unferth's suggestions create a dramatic foil to this expectation and, when resolution comes with Beowulf's speech, the effect is an even greater elevation of the hero. The problem hinges on whose story, Unferth's or Beowulf's should be accepted and it is Beowulf's cutting denunciation of his taunter in

Nō ic wih̄t fram þē  
swylce searonīða secgan h̄yrde,  
billa brōgan. Breca nāefre gīt  
aet heaðolāce, nē gehwaeper incer,  
swā dēorlice dāed gefremede  
fāgum sweordum - nō ic þaes fela gylpe -,  
þēah ðū þinum brōðrum tō banan wurde,  
hēafodmāegum; þaes þū in helle scealt  
werhðo drēogan, þēah þin wit duge.  
Secge ic þē tō sōðe, sunu Ecglāfes,  
þaet nāefre Grendel swā fela gryra gefremede,  
atol aeglāeca ealdre þinum,  
h̄yndō on Heorote, gif þin hige wāere,  
sefa swā searogrim, swā þū self talast; ...

11. 581-595

which established Beowulf's credentials above Unferth's.

The repetition of events occurring in the main narrative thread may appear as a dramatic flaw in the poem. However it does seem that the focus in these repetitions is less upon the events themselves than upon the speaker. The complementary interplay between action and the subsequent commentary upon that action is a means of characterization. The fight with Grendel is ultimately discussed three times in the course of the poem. Initially the audience is informed of the Grendel fight by the narrator, who in this sequence is neutral to the point of quasi-omniscience. We know at first hand, as it were, of the scene; its tension, horror, courage and strength. We witness Grendel's entry into the hall; we are led to visualize his dreadful eyes, his slaughter of Beowulf's retainer and his advance toward the hero. Above all we are made aware of Beowulf's cool, almost callous courage. Nothing is said of this by Beowulf in his *résumé* in ll. 957-979. He is hardly self-effacing, but there is no explicit boasting. He is sufficiently self-contained to retain the terror of it for himself. His speech rings rather like a thrilled sporting commentary 'What fun it was - I wish you could have seen it!' After a fight to the death with the monstrous this is truly heroic.

A similar tendency is revealed in the fight with Grendel's mother. We are offered a full vision of the terror and stress watching Beowulf in the cave, heightened by the anxiety we witness in a shift to the waiting retainers. Then in a reported speech in the first person we hear Beowulf's terse commentary on salient points, devoid of explicit expression of emotion. Again we 'know what he has been through' and his underplay of the situation is a self-

discipline which enhances the stoicism peculiar to the Anglo-Saxon hero. It is a measure of the inner strength of Beowulf.

The flash-backs that occur before the dragon fight as Beowulf recalls tragedies in his nation's past, are frequently criticized as a distraction from the main action and a puncturing of suspense. However closer attention to the primary concerns of the poem and of this section in particular, reveals the digressions as apt. The nation is about to disintegrate after the dragon fight and the reminiscences become a record of their history, a passing on of tales of a doomed people. These flash-backs also function as a revelation of Beowulf as a preserver of such tales and so of tradition. This is a characterization of a generic nature. The hero in epic is an embodiment of the elements vital to his society and as such becomes an individual of extraordinary significance to it. Beowulf is seen here knitting his nation together once more with its lore and history in his role as a maintainer of custom and security. His loss must inevitably maim the nation and, in Beowulf's specific case, the loss is disastrous.

There appears to be a cyclical patterning in *Beowulf* with one fatal link missing. Beowulf's fate parallels Hrothgar's up to a point. Both have heroic youths, both come to their thrones as a result of feuds, knit their nations together and rule them well until old age when both are besieged by monsters, but no young peer, as competent as Beowulf, comes to the hero's aid in his need. Wiglaf is one of those ordinary mortals who possesses Beowulf's fine qualities in lesser proportion.

This parallel however, is a superficial one. The difference between Beowulf and Hrothgar is at least as striking as the similarities noted above. There is no indication in the poem that Beowulf's court suffers from the malaise and submerged malignancy seen in Heorot. Hrothgar is forced to submit to Grendel's ravages for twelve winters:

*twelf wintra tīd      Waes sēo hwīl micel;  
wine Scyldinga ...      torn geþolode*

ll. 146-148

whereas Beowulf seemingly acts as soon as possible against his adversary. Although there is no Unferth in Beowulf's court, there are men who desert him in his most need. Although no political duplicities such as those seen in Heorot appear in Beowulf's court, the crumbling of his nation under a wave of vengeance is foreseen. Nevertheless the essential difference between the two kings remains openly apparent: Beowulf acts and Hrothgar does not. Neither action nor pacifity is proved to be more functional, but Beowulf achieves heroism and Hrothgar does not. This is a vital point in the understanding of the poem and one which I will discuss further in Chapter 6.

It would seem odd that an epic poem should extend its interest to the old age of a glorious young man it introduces, particularly when that old age brings death and disaster. In *Beowulf* this becomes an extension of the heroic narrative into a quasi-tragedy, its major effect being an increase rather than a decrease in heroism. The effect of the old hero striving against impossible

odds, which fifty years previously he might have been equal to, is at once both supremely heroic and profound in pathos. As with Byrhtnoth in *The Battle of Maldon*, Beowulf, in resolving to meet the dragon alone in his old age, chooses the heroic rather than the rational. Their separate ruins are the result of an incorrect assessment of the odds, measured through the filter of honour, and this is the quintessence of true heroism.

Epic is almost invariably disastrous. It contains the germ of drama, and more especially that of tragic drama. *Beowulf*, contrary to early beliefs or desires, is far removed from a documentary of events, and, like tragedy, the focus is on the crises themselves. Greenfield has examined the tragic elements of *Beowulf*<sup>21</sup> and made some interesting points. He observes several striking and informative differences between epic and tragedy in terms of the hero: the epic hero is at one with his community, he is a personification of its virtues, whereas the tragic hero is isolated. The death of the tragic hero is a purgation, and he is succeeded by a new and better era, but the death of the epic hero is a disaster, an ending of the good and glorious, followed by no foreseeable re-instatement of virtue. The death of the tragic hero is a resolution of suffering, but the epic hero's death is the herald of a depleted life for his community, an overture to gloom.

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21 Stanley B. Greenfield, 'Beowulf and Epic Tragedy', *Comparative Literature*, LIV (1962), pp. 91-102.

It is noteworthy that in *Beowulf* the sense of glory emerges more profoundly than the sense of tragic darkness. It is the fortitude, courage and honour which remain in the mind. This does not allay the pessimism and gloom, but rather heightens it and provides a foil. The struggle against the darkness is the very heroism, the heroism of Valhalla. This in *Beowulf* is a further admission of paganism. The darkness is overcome in the slaying of the dragon, but the light does not prevail.

It must be realised that Greenfield's comments as noted above, are based on a comparison of *Beowulf* itself with accepted tragic frameworks. Although the poem as a whole cannot be said to constitute a tragedy, as we now define the term, the question of whether Beowulf himself is an early tragic hero does bear investigation. There are very definite tragic elements in the dragon sequence and the reader does witness 'a tragedy'.

Essentially, the tragic hero must undergo a certain development, internally and in status. He must reach a crisis of self-awareness, a perception of how he has come to find himself in his tragic situation, and in the light of this, still retain heroism. The growth of the tragic hero may be defined as a progress through isolation to fuller awareness. He begins the tragic sequence at an apparently high point in his existence, where he finds himself secure in his expectations of his own identity. He is a man in harmony with his environment and his own being. Tragedy occurs when either of these two factors move beyond his control; those

things that nurture his identity fall apart and he stands alone with his soul. Finally he is confronted with a reality which proves his identity an illusion.

The early sections of *Beowulf* (previous to l. 2200) are only relevant here in that they allow Beowulf to demonstrate to the audience, to his community and to himself, that he is indeed the hero in a heroic environment before the dragon sequence. As the 'tragic' section of the poem begins at l. 2200 Beowulf is in the supreme position of an established, well-loved and successful king of a secure nation.

*fīftig wintra                    hē gehēold tela*  
*eald ēpelweard- ...        - waes ða frōd cyning,*

11. 2208-2210

However, in this case, the hero's peace of mind needs to be inferred. Practically nothing is known of his immediate personal concerns. No mention is made of any intimates and for this reason the hero appears as isolated at this point, as he is in the closing sections of the dragon fight. Moreover, it is only in his last battle that Beowulf does in fact have a companion. Thus it is impossible to propose a progressive isolation of the hero in *Beowulf* in these terms.

There is nevertheless one single moment in the poem where the inner life of Beowulf is suddenly touched upon in a problematic passage:

*hrēow on hreðre,            ðaet ðam gōdan waes*  
*wēnde se wīsa,            hygesorga mæst;*  
*ofer ealde riht            þaet hē Wealdende*  
*bitre gebulge;            ēcean Dryhtne*  
*þēostrum geþoncum,       swā him geþywe ne waes.*

11. 2327-2332

I shall examine this passage again in Chapter 6, but here I should like to observe that the loneliness and self-consciousness in the hero adds a dimension to the narrative, slightly beyond the requirements of heroic lay or its extended form, the epic. At this point the poet evokes a sympathy for a sensitive and suffering human being, subject to doubt and insecurity even in his elevated position. It is significant that it is not righteous indignation, but self-examination to which Beowulf is moved in his crisis. After this Beowulf again becomes a public figure and his inner life from this point on exists only on an inferential level. Little development can be inferred from his speeches beyond a sense of nostalgia and a pervading air of gloom. The potential to develop Beowulf into a tragic hero is certainly present in the latter sections of the poem, but the poet finally does not permit him to emerge fully rounded, above the fabric of the narrative.

Beowulf remains an element of the world he inhabits and is never fully individualized. He needs the heroic setting for his personality to evolve. Conversely, he is the paragon of that setting and without his deeds and voice, the heroic world is meaningless.

## Chapter Five

### FURTHER ASPECTS OF PRESENTATION

### 5.1 Time in *Beowulf*

It is very probably an anachronism to apply to *Beowulf* any detailed examination of its time sequence. As Mendilow has observed, twentieth century man has developed, for a variety of reasons, an obsession with time.<sup>1</sup> It is not easy to imagine the author of *Beowulf* giving serious theoretical consideration to his treatment of time. Indeed, at least superficially, the arrangement of time in the poem seems entirely random and unpremeditated. However, any tale must have its beginning and its end, and the material which falls between must in some way reflect the rationale for the starting and stopping at the given points. Hence, a study of the *Beowulf* poet's techniques in the realm of time, however inadvertant or diffuse they may be, can possibly illuminate the poem further.

Time and mutability are thematically significant in *Beowulf*. The whole poem is framed by the concept of *in gēardagum* (l. 1), and constitutes an examination of the heroism of an ethos which will come no more. At the poem's closure the future is predicted as a doom-laden ending: the distintegration of the Geatish nation is foreseen. The framework of the lost past, which is given to the audience in the first line, makes for a perspective on this forecast. By means of a dramatic irony the old woman's funeral dirge (ll. 3152-3155), constitutes a statement of ending for the heroic ethos. The structure which constantly implies a sense of past

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1 A.A. Mendilow, *Time and the Novel* (London: Peter Nevill, 1952), Chapter 1.

renders the final prophecy ironically valid. The audience knows that, and is asked to understand why, the glory of the Geats must pass away.

Within this broad framework of the past, the span of which we infer to be approximately fifty to sixty years (the length of Beowulf's reign, plus one would suppose, a few years between the Grendel incident and Beowulf's assumption of the Geatish throne), the poem is a confusing sequence of flash-backs, prefigurations and time leaps. The confusion lies in the analysis and definition of these variations however, and not within the narrative logic of *Beowulf*. As with any fictional narrative, the poem's time patterns depend on psychological and thematic rationales, rather than on pure chronology or clock-time sequences. The illusion of reality in fiction is dependent on this aspect<sup>2</sup> and paradoxically, fluctuations in time enhance rather than inhibit audience involvement in the fictional world. Essentially the logic which governs the *montage*<sup>3</sup> of narrative is that of human discourse. *Beowulf*, with its dominant authorial medium, depends on this inherent rationale very strongly. The audience expects the narrative voice to make selections and connections in his material, so that a unified artificial construct emerges in accordance with the probabilities of usual thought and language processes. Thus the *montage* of *Beowulf* ought

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2 Mendilow, *Time and the Novel*, Chapter 6.

3 Mendilow finds this term borrowed from the film, useful in describing time-shifts in fiction.

to reflect a patterning in accordance with the internal logic of its material and with the expected conventions of telling a tale.

It can be seen that the leaps in time in the description of the hero's life do fulfill their own logic in the poem. We begin, in true epic style, in the middle. We encounter the hero for the first time as he sets out for Denmark. Only at the end of the first section of the poem (ll. 2183-2189), do we hear of Beowulf's somewhat ignominious childhood:

*Hēan waes lange,  
 swā hyne Gēata bearn      gōdne ne tealdon,  
 nē hyne on medobence      micles wyrðne  
 drihten Wedera      gedōn wolde;  
 swyðe wēndon,      þeat hē slēac wāere,  
 aedeling unfrom.      Edwenden cwōm  
 tīrēadigum menn      torna gehwylces.*

In the verbal contest with Unferth we are told of one incident in adolescence. The complexity of Beowulf's assumption of the throne is handled with extreme rapidity (ll. 2369-2390) and his immediate political problems are covered in some eight lines directly afterwards. Flash-backs given during Beowulf's soliloquy on his personal deeds comprise largely re-iterated material. Only Beowulf's part in the Frisian campaign is added.

This may be considered evidence of Beowulf's not being the central concern of the narrative. However, it needs to be seen in the perspective of the method of characterization of the hero. Beowulf himself is an *exemplum* of the heroic ethos; he is the ideal of that system of values. The nature of his personality is in part

constructed from a series of examples of his action. They are inserted into the narrative at relevant points. The Breca incident, a flash-back to adolescence, supplies a validation of the hero's motives and his credentials as a monster-slayer and swimmer. In Beowulf's soliloquy the flash-backs endorse his heroism and show his stature as the stay of his people. It is unnecessary to have a chronologically logical, or even complete picture of Beowulf. The poem is not biography, but even biography need not fall into a sequential pattern. Its selection and arrangement of incidents will depend on the general emphasis of the work. Beowulf's most significant characteristics are his heroism and his kingly qualities, and most of the time-shifts in material directly related to him, serve to permit evidence of these qualities to come forward at appropriate moments.

A brief synopsis of the poem's time sequence might be useful at this point. The poem begins with the birth of a new Danish dynasty under Scyld and rapidly moves to his funeral at l. 26. At this point the narrative pace slows, giving emphasis to the funeral and so giving to the poem its strongly elegiac quality. We then move relatively swiftly through Danish genealogy to Hrothgar's reign. Heorot's building takes up eighteen lines and the Grendel sequence starts. The expository section, which tells of Grendel's repeated depredations (ll. 86-188) is slower in pace than the sections which precede it, but not as slow as in the sections which occur after Beowulf's entry into the narrative. From this point (l. 194) the leisurely pace of the epic mode comes into its own. The Grendel sequence, from this point on, is filled with

elaborate rhetorical speeches and much digressional material. Despite its action, the pace is slow.

Beowulf's formal speeches (ll. 260-285; 407-455; 957-979; 1474-1491; 1651-1670; 1817-1839) and his report back to Hygelac (ll. 2200-2151) make up much of the material. Beowulf's reply to Unferth incorporating the Breca incident takes up nearly one hundred lines. Three lengthy digressions: Sigemund, Finn and Ingeld, as well as the shorter Thryth digression also find their place in the Grendel sequence. Hence the time spent on the actual fights and the issues directly related to them, is relatively short (ll. 710-836 and ll. 1492-1630).

Much the same kind of emphasis occurs in the latter part of the poem. A space of fifty years is covered in just under ten lines in ll. 220-2209a, and the dragon appears, but almost immediately at l. 2231 the digression of the last survivor begins. We return to the dragon at l. 2270 and then remove to Hygelac's Frisian campaign at l. 2354. This last issue allows the poet to include a little more explanation of Beowulf's rise to kingship. At l. 2399 we return to the dragon, but Beowulf's soliloquy begins at l. 2325 and the main narrative thread only resumes at l. 2538. Wiglaf's credentials and speech interrupt the first sequence at ll. 2611-2660. The end of the fight and Beowulf's death are treated as a unit. Then at l. 2860 Wiglaf's second speech begins the long rhetorical analyses of the situation that close the poem. Beowulf's funeral occupies ll. 3138-3183.

In both sections of the poem the events of the main narrative thread form a kind of foreground. The flash-backs and digressive material act as a counterpoint to the action and throw it into perspective. Prefigurative statements and motifs generally refer to events in the main narrative thread, such as the repeated forewarnings of Beowulf's death. Flash-backs more often concern themselves with material which demonstrates the nature and workings of the heroic ethos. There is an exception in Beowulf's prediction concerning the Heathobearidan feud during his report back to Hrothgar. This functions as an appropriate glorification of the hero, showing his awareness of the nature of the feud and the dangers of political duplicity. Digressive material functions most powerfully as an illumination of the present by the past. The legend of Finn reflects with irony upon Wealtheow, particularly with the emphasis in the rendition being put on Hildeburg. The Hrethel digression reflects on age and mortality when these issues become central in the latter part of the poem. The Sigemund prefiguration however, reflects ironically on the narrated future.

No deliberate patterning of time has emerged from my analysis of the poem. The relationship between narrating and narrated time seems quite arbitrary. Although the *Beowulf* poet may not appear to have consciously manipulated his time sequences, his awareness of time as the thematic element is patently clear.

Irving<sup>4</sup> has observed that Tolkien's phrase 'until the dragon comes' is most appropriate to the poem for many of the values and

4 Edward B. Irving, *A Reading of Beowulf* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1968), pp. 31-42.

situations in it are subject to an 'until' qualification. The majority of the constructions which contain *oð* or *oððæt* indicate that bad follows good. Irving has restricted his analysis to actual occurrences of *oððæt*, but there are a great many instances in the poem where the idea is implied without the use of the word. Heorot stands glorious until destroyed by fire. There is joy in Heorot until Grendel comes. Heremod is good until sin enters him. Aeschere sleeps peacefully after Grendel's death until the avenger comes.

Hrothgar's 'sermon' (ll. 1688-1784) is a study in the concept of 'until', and as such occupies a central position in thematic terms. His glowing praise of Beowulf and his specific endorsement of his humility:

*Eal þū hit gepyldum healdest,  
maegen mid mōdes synttrum.*

11. 1705-1706

are tempered by gloomy examples of unforeseen mutability. For the second time Beowulf's name is linked with Heremod's. Like Beowulf he is given strength and power, but he fails to retain what Hall translates as 'calmness and discretion'<sup>5</sup> in his elevated position. From Heremod, Hrothgar is led to construct a parable revealing the ease with which sin and death can destroy the complacent man of power:

*hē þæt wyrse ne con -,  
oð ðæt him on innan oferhygða dæl  
weaxeð ond wrīdað;*

11. 1739-1741

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5 John R. Clark Hall, *Beowulf and the Finnesburg Fragment* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1911, rev. ed. 1950), p. 107.

After a direct warning to Beowulf against following this sequence, Hrothgar admits that he too was subject to the illusions of power before Grendel came. The concept of mutability is one of the most important factors in determining the structure of *Beowulf*. This reveals the rationale for the time-leap between the sections of the poem: in an examination of change, the essential features are two contrasting states. These need not be in opposition as Tolkien feels<sup>6</sup>, but must show an alteration. Hence the poem shows Beowulf in youth and new glory, and then in old age, still in honour and glory, but changed.

Section B is the resolution of the concept of 'until'. The dragon sequence begins with

*deorcum nihtum*      *oð ðaet an ongan*  
    *draca rīcsian,*

11. 2210-2211

and falling as it does after the brief narrative of Beowulf's rise to the throne and exemplary rule, it dramatically highlights the transience of his glory. The same pattern recurs in ll. 2354-2399. Hygelac's death is related and Beowulf's assumption of the throne is reiterated in greater detail, and then the dragon makes the same dramatic intrusion:

*Swā hē nīða gehwane*      *genesen haefde,*  
*slīðra geslyhta,*      *sunu Ecgðīowes,*  
*ellenweorca,*      *oð ðone āne daeg,*  
*þē hē wið þām wyrme*      *gewegan sceoīde.*

11. 2397-2400

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<sup>6</sup> Tolkien, 'The Monsters and the Critics', p. 81.

By the Ravenswood digression, the 'until' pattern is approaching resolution. The messenger's words:

*Nū ys lēodum wēn*  
*orleghwīle, syððan underne*  
*Froncum ond Frýsum fyll cyninges*  
*wīde weorðeð.*

11. 2911-2914

show that only doom can be forecast. The hope for glory in battle no longer appears. The Geatish woman's incantation indicates that there is no reason to consider the predictions hypothetical:

*sāede geneahhe,*  
*þeat hīo hyre hearmdagas hearde ondrēde,*  
*wælfylla worn, wīgendes egesan,*  
*hýnðo ond hæftnȳd.*

11. 3152-3155

The whole structure of the poem moves to this point, from Scyld to Beowulf's end. Scyld shows a reversal from bad to good and Beowulf completes the cycle.

The episodic nature of the poem makes it difficult to analyse the more specific characteristics of the poet's use of time-shifts. *Beowulf* has a simple, non-causal plot. Causality in narrative has a profound influence on the handling of time. One of the most common rationales of the time-shift in fiction is the implied 'because'. These time-shifts are typically used to illuminate the narrated present in an explanatory way. In *Beowulf* however, the links between the time-shifts and the foreground narrative are allusive rather than explanatory. They extrapolate, rather than elucidate. The series of flash-backs in Section B of the poem, for example, constitute a review of Geatish history, which

does not function primarily as an explanation of the narrated present. The time-shifts do not necessarily imply causality between the narrated past and the narrated present. Although some do, as noted above, show the reasons for Beowulf's assumption of the Geatish throne, this is not an issue of great interest in the main narrative thread. The emphasis even in these semi-explanatory flash-backs is on Beowulf's honourable reluctance, his heroic deportment in battle and his success as a king. The narrative substance is relatively underplayed. The most significant effect of the flash-backs is the creation of pathos, through Beowulf's own nostalgia for the days of vigorous youth and for a secure, glorious nation. These time-shifts all deal with travails overcome. Despite the death of Hygelac, the nation is able to survive until the loss of Beowulf. At this point in the poem the audience knows his death to be imminent and this suffuses his tales with dread for the nation.

This anticipation of Beowulf's death pervades the latter sections of the poem. The 'until' pattern dominates the advent of the dragon and after this a new sequence takes over. This is even more strongly prefigurative. In the earlier parts of the poem, the only overt suggestions of the events in Section B are the Sigemund digression and possibly Hrothgar's 'sermon'. The dragon sequence, on the other hand, is recurringly interspersed with allusions to Beowulf's end. Thus the entire B section of the poem is a movement towards a known narrated future. The tension in the main narrative thread arises from *how* this end will be accomplished.

Whereas the early section of the poem draws considerable interest from its use of surprise tactics, the second section is a steady resolution of the inevitable. The appearance of Grendel's mother is not anticipated in any way within the narrative, but once the dragon appears the audience is fully aware that closure is imminent.

Thus it can be seen that time in *Beowulf* is more obviously functional as a thematic element than as a deliberately organizational device. The episodic and epic nature of the poem makes its structural patterning both complex and diffuse. The fluctuations of time within this structure tend to function as allusive extrapolations upon the substance of the main narrative thread and do not show any overt causal relationship to it.

## 5.2 The importance of visual presentation

Visualization is a mode of reading in which the data presenting an imitation of the real world in terms of physical and scenic elements, is assimilated in the reader's mind in such a way that a picture forms. From these pictures, in much the same way as he views a cinema presentation, the reader extracts and evolves the thematic relevance of what he is given. Non-visual reading occurs when the scenic data immediately supplies the reader with thematic and dramatic significance without recourse to the intervening stage of reconstruction of the fictional world in quasi-physical terms. This is a mode permitting a more distanced approach. An objective, analytic, non-involved stance is both economical and effective in

allowing the reader to extract more directly from the text its artistic and aesthetic values. He is able to conceptualize significance and meaning directly from the relevant clues.

However, it seems to me that with *Beowulf* much would be lost in rigid adherence to this technique. Certainly the poem, in its use of symbolism and motifs requires the reader to apply a process of abstraction throughout, but far more of the material depends on mental actualization for its dramatic impact to be felt. Much of *Beowulf* communicates on a visual level.

A brief consideration of the kind of literature which has little recourse to visualization reveals it to be primarily concerned with principles and abstracts. By far the greater proportion of it is non-fictional<sup>7</sup>, but this does not imply that all non-fiction is non-visual<sup>8</sup>. When writing undertakes to assume the mimetic, to present life-like situations, it normally needs to define its setting or environment for its action with some degree of concreteness. It is not however, always necessary to be precise and extensive in such definition. Obviously only that which is relevant is required. In a tale of intellectual abstractions, visualization is not always an asset. In, for example, the novels of Jean-Paul Satre one can progress quite satisfactorily, and in-

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7 For example, legal documents, chemical textbooks, etc.

8 For example, travelogues, surgery textbooks, etc. However, one cannot be generically categorical nor ignore the individual habits of readers in this sphere.

deed better, if one immediately extracts from 'visual' data the abstract artistic purpose without reconstructing each scene visually.

However, where action is largely physical and any mental battles have tangible sources, visualization becomes important for full realization of the work. Something of Beowulf's splendour and heroism would be lost if we did not picture him as an individual striding against the back-drop of the presented world. Something of the thrill and excitement would go unnoticed were we not to picture the violence of the battle scenes, and most significantly the real terror of the monstrous cannot be fully comprehended if Grendel and the dragon are not imaginatively reconstructed. Part of the nature of *Beowulf* is that it requires an involvement of its audience in much the same way as drama does.

In as far as the original audience was nearer to the experiences, setting and psychological ethos of the poem, their step into the fictional world was probably less conscious and of a lesser magnitude, than ours must be. As far as we can ascertain they would have had to acknowledge a world more glorious in honour and heroism, and one beset by darker shades of paganism than their own. Our step is larger, and much of our imagining is necessarily based on surmise. Nevertheless the step is important and the style of *Beowulf* compels us to this end.

Renoir has demonstrated the cinematic treatment of Grendel's approach to Heorot. After a detailed analysis of the passage he concludes:

If we recall that the entire passage contains only one suggestion of sound ... we must ... conclude that the terror which the scene so powerfully evokes in the audience is entirely the result of masterfully selected visual details consistently presented from the most immediately effective point of view.<sup>9</sup>

Selectivity is important and it is the close-up presentation of details that makes the visual aspects so forceful and memorable. The technique permeates *Beowulf*. In each scene specific details are pinpointed and particularly realised. The strength of the visual aspects of the poem is readily seen in the following passage:

Ðā þæt sweord ongan  
 aefter heafoswāte hildegicelum,  
 wīgbil wanian; þæt waes wundra sum,  
 þæt hit eal gemaelt īse gelīcost,  
 ðonne forstes bend Faeder onlāeteð,  
 onwīndeð wāelrāpas, sē geweald hafað  
 sāela ond mǣla; þæt is sōð Metod.

11. 1605-1611

Visualization is maximized by using the verbal construction of *ongan wanian*, which emphasizes a gradual progressive process. The fragmentation suggested in *hildegicelum* is re-inforced in *īse gelīcost*. The tone and measured pace of *þæt waes wundra sum* together with its statement of a visual marvel force the reader to concretize the curious spectacle. The superlative in *īse gelīcost* suggests a tantalizing difficulty in description and offers a concrete stimulus. This becomes extended into a picture of ice melting in the spring thaw. Further visual force is

<sup>9</sup> Alain Renoir, 'Point of View and Design for Terror in *Beowulf*', *Neophilologische Mitteilungen*, LXIII (1962), p. 67. rpt. *BP*, pp. 154-167.

added to this in the metaphor of *onwinded waelrāpas*, which also emphasizes the awesomeness, power and mystery of the event. It is a complex structure, whose logic is essentially visual.

During the scenes of horror we are presented with very gory details, which seem deliberately intended to force visualization and prevent distancing. Often it is extremely brief allusions which do this, as in the slaughter of Ongentheow:

*Hyne yrringa*  
*Wulf Wonrēding*     *wāepne gerāēhte,*  
*þæt him for swenge*     *swāt āēdrum sprong*  
*forð under fexe.*<sup>+</sup>

11. 2964-2967

In the seizure of Beowulf's retainer the details are heaped one upon the other. Nevertheless, the final little point is the most powerful:

*ac hē gefēng hraða*     *forman sīðe*  
*slāependne rinc,*     *slāt unwearmum,*  
*bāt bānlocan,*     *blōd ēdrum dranc,*  
*synsnāēdum swealh;*     *sōna haefde*  
*unlyfigendes*     *eal gefeormod,*  
*fēt ond folma.*<sup>+</sup>

11. 740-745

Beowulf's funeral shows this characteristic functioning highly effectively. We are told that the Geats build a funeral pyre in 11. 3137-3138. Any tendency to store this information conceptually without a concrete realization is prevented by the description:

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<sup>+</sup> My underlining

*helmum behongen, hildebordum*  
*beorhtum byrnum, ...*

11. 3139-3140

The body of Beowulf is laid upon the pyre, the fire kindled and then with

*wudurēc āstāh*  
*sweart ofer swioðole, swōgende lēg*  
*wōpe bewunden -windblond gelaeg -,*  
*oð þaet hē ðā bānhūs gebrocen haefde*  
*hāt on hreðre.*

11. 3144-3148

a vivid and provocative image is presented in the black column of smoke rising in the suddenly calmed air. Then the mind's eye is focussed on the corpse as it breaks up in the heat. Once again it is the sharp focus of detail which enhances the impact of the scene. The movement to the Geatish woman in the funeral sequence has the same effect. Her bound-up hair (*bundenheorde*) is a detail that makes for an awareness of her individuality, so suggesting a personal tragedy bound within the national one. In her individuality, she constitutes one of the myriad facets of a society, only one of the whole body, all of whom must suffer a like distress. This focus on the individual explicates the magnitude of the public tragedy in its concentration on an entity whom the audience can more readily conceptualize and identify with.

In more general terms, it should be noted that in *Beowulf* scenic presentation is effected by a conglomeration of detail, rather than by a sweeping overview. During the burial of Scyld, for example, we are given glimpses of the body being carried to the shore, the ornamental prow of the vessel, its coating of ice, the position of Scyld under the mast, the burial treasures and

the golden standard above his head. The entire setting is not realised; the crowd, the sky and sea fade out of focus and the small salient details are stressed. Similarly, in the building of Heorot we are told only that

*Sele hl̄fæde*  
*hēah ond hornġeap ...*

ll. 81-82

and the focus falls rather on Hrothgar dealing out treasure in the completed hall. It is only during the entrance of Grendel in lines 721ff. that we are told that the door is secured by forged bands, that the floor is *fāgne* (l. 725), and later that the 'fair dwelling'

*irnan ond ūtan ... faeste waes*  
*īrenbendum*  
*searōþoncum besmīþod.*

ll. 773-775

Only in l. 777 during the middle of the contest for the hall between Grendel and Beowulf, are we told that its mead-benches are adorned with gold.

Visual details are offered at moments when their significance is readily apparent. Heorot, as a material object, matters only in that it is fine, well-wrought and contains beautiful objects - all testimony to the glory of man. The scenery of the mere and the dragon's haunt is significant only in that it comprises terrifying or repulsive features: rocky cliffs, forest fens, narrow treacherous paths, steaming, unearthly springs and gloomy caverns. Thus visualization in *Beowulf* is by no means an end in itself,

but rather functions as a suggestive concrete aid to the realization of abstract elements in the poem.

In his consideration of legends related to Grendel and his dam, Lawrence compares the setting of the monster's hall with its equivalent in the *Grettirssaga*, commenting that:

The poet of *Beowulf* did not visualize things as clearly as the saga writer ... The epic poet's description is blurred in just the way a man would blur the description of a scene that he did not clearly understand. Perhaps he had never seen a waterfall; and if he had, it was probably different from the lofty Scandinavian forces.<sup>10</sup>

Lawrence's comments are valid and most interesting in their context, but I would contest the notion that the lack of clarity in setting at this point is less than deliberate. The *Beowulf* poet, throughout his work, blurs the panorama and focusses on details. This metonymic tendency could have two motivations: either the poet is relying on his audience to fill in the vaguer shapes from their acquaintance with the tale, or tales, in other forms; or he has deliberately abstained from offering a concise picture, so that his audience is forced to extrapolate from select detail, their own imaginative total picture. Both these possibilities support the necessities of an oral mode of presentation: the audience requires both verbal economy and a high level of personal involvement for communication of this kind to be fully effective. Hence concrete, metonymic imagery is an essential in orally-delivered alliterative verse. The audience is able to grasp with

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<sup>10</sup> Lawrence, *Beowulf and Epic Tradition*, p. 185.

ease a simply-worded phrase giving them a single piece of data, which they can visualize. Then from general human experience, or from traditional poetic conventions, they can extrapolate the overtones of atmosphere, irony, or any other significant aspect which the concrete detail implies in context.

Spearing has noted, in discussing the necessity for the oral poet to employ familiar diction and imagery, that:

Within the staple conventional idiom there will of course still be wide scope for a gifted poet to express his individual vision by gradual shadings, cumulative effects; but not by a persistent use of sharply individual turns of phrase. If he is to keep his audience with him, he must usually describe swords as being as bright as silver, and an unhorsed knight as rolling like a ball.<sup>11</sup>

Orally-delivered poetry depends heavily on the stock response, the cliché and the formula. It is interesting to note how strongly visual many clichés are, particularly when they concern abstract ideas and emotions: for example, 'as happy as a lark', 'to make a mountain out of a molehill', 'down in the mouth', 'move heaven and earth', 'turn the other cheek', etc., etc. The process at work would seem to be a kind of concrete shorthand. Through the process of visualization the reader or listener is able to conceptualize the ideas, emotions and actions inherent in the given concrete picture and transfer them to the context in which it appears.

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<sup>11</sup> A.C. Spearing, *Criticism and Medieval Poetry* (London: Edward Arnold, 1972), p. 20.

By no means all the visualization in *Beowulf* is dependent on transference from stock phrases, but considerable use is made of concrete shorthand, as can be seen in the following passage:

*Geseah ða on searwum sigeēadig bil,  
 ealdwseord eotenisc ecgum þyhtig,  
 wigena weorðmynd; þaet waes wāepna cyst, -  
 buton hit waes mære ðonne āenig mon oðer  
 tō beadulāce aetberan mehte,  
 gōd ond geatolīc, gīganta geweorc.  
 Hē gefēng þā fetelhilt, freca Scyldinga  
 hrēoh ond heorogrim, hringmāel gebraegd  
 aldres orwēna, yrringa slōh,  
 þaet hire wið halse heard grāpode,  
 bānhringas braec; bil eal ðurhwōd  
 fāegne flāeschoman; hēo on flet gecrong,  
 sweord waes swātig, secg weorce gefeh.  
 Līxte se lēoma, lēoht inne stōd,  
 efne swā of hefene hādre scīneo  
 rodores candel.*

11. 1557-1572

The glorious giant-made sword with its exquisite workmanship carries implications of hope and victory for the hero in his desperate moment. *þaet waes wāepna cyst* indicates the appropriateness of this best of weapons for the best of men. This idea is reinforced in a typical re-statement in l. 1560 in which it is indicated that only Beowulf could handle it anyway. This in itself is a concrete reminder of Beowulf's physical superiority over other men at the moment of crisis. Beowulf's vanquishing blow is dealt with in heroic detail, its impact fully realised by the strong physical imagery and emphasis on motion. At l. 1570 the poet's use of concrete detail with extensive implications is readily seen. With the death of Grendel's mother, the gloom of the subterranean cavern is suddenly dispelled by a triumphant, permeating light, just as powerful as the sun's expulsion of

night. The metaphysical victory of good over evil and the purgation of Denmark is represented in concrete, metaphorical terms.<sup>12</sup>

Thus *Beowulf's* indebtedness to the oral tradition has given it its strongly visual quality. The poet's habitual use of blurred backgrounds and sharply-focussed close-ups should be viewed in this light. The technique, whether intentional or inadvertent, seems to be a functional one, which, by its metonymic quality, ensures audience involvement, both through visualization and the need for imaginative fulfillment.

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12 Herbert G. Wright, 'Good and Evil; Light and Darkness; Joy and Sorrow in *Beowulf*', *Review of English Studies*, VIII (1957), pp. 1-11, rpt. *ABC*, offers further interesting interpretations in this line.

Chapter Six

THE STRUCTURE OF *BEOWULF*

### 6.1 The earlier sections of the poem

The structure of *Beowulf* has evoked much controversy<sup>1</sup>. Patterning is easily apparent, yet has never been unequivocally resolved. At the heart of the problem lies the fact that *Beowulf* has a largely non-causal plot. The essence of the poem is that of a world and a narrative sequence governed by *wyrd*. There is no causal effective between the feud with Grendel and his mother, and the fight with the dragon. However, each of these two narrative sequences has its own causal pattern : in the first Beowulf sets out for Denmark in search of *lof* and his victory precipitates a revenge and its reprisal; in the second, the actions of an unknown exile precipitate another revenge and reprisal. Beyond this similarity, there is little that is comparable between the two sections on a structural level. The changes in technique after line 2200 are marked.

Before line 2200 the most remarkable structural aspect of the poem is its repetitious nature. The two main cycles of action : the fight with Grendel and the fight with Grendel's mother, fall into a rigid recurring pattern. One may propose a medial break in the first cycle, at a point just before Grendel's mother attacks:

*Sigon þā tō slāepe. Sum sāre angeald  
 āefenraeste, swā him ful oft gelamp,  
 siþðan goldsele Grendel warode,  
 unriht aefnde, oð ðaet ende becwōm,  
 swylt aefter synnum.*

11. 1251-1255

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1 Bloomfield, Bonjour, Brodeur, Du Bois, Rogers, Sisam and Tolkien offer a wealth of contradiction. Please refer to Bibliography.

and another break before the hero appears in the poem at line 194:

*waes þæt gewin tō swyð,*  
*lāp ond longsum, þē on ða lēode becōm,*  
*nydwracu nīþgrim, nihtbealwa māest.*  
 \*\*\*\*\*  
*Ðaet fram hām gefraegn Higelāces þegn ...*  
11. 191-194

Lines 1-194 constitute a section of exposition and action without Beowulf's presence.

For convenience during discussion I therefore propose to segment *Beowulf* as follows:

Section A (i)	11. 1-193
(ii)	11. 194-1255
(iii)	11. 1255-2199
 Section B	 11. 2200-3182

Section A (i) is largely introductory. It is an establishment of setting and the initial antagonist : Grendel. It is expository of all the primary elements of Section A, except the hero. It is essentially an identification of the Danes in terms of genealogy and a description of Heorot, revealing the glory and nobility that is in peril. As the poem progresses the foreboding, only vaguely implicit in Scyld's funeral, becomes more entrenched with the specific allusion to the Heathobearidan feud:

*Sele hlīfade*  
*hēah ond horngēap; heaðowylma bād,*  
*lāðan līges; ne waes hit lenge þā gēn,*  
*þæt se ecghete āpumswēoran*  
*aefter waelnūðe wæcnan scolde.*  
11. 81-85

The verification of the Danish glory is wanting as fate intervenes. The glory persists but it has acquired a stamp of frailty. At this point (l. 86) the problem insuperable to Hrothgar, is introduced : Grendel. His threat looms all the larger for the mention of Heorot's final doom. We know by inference long before line 190 that Hrothgar cannot overcome the threat, despite his magnificent kingdom and lineage.

Exposition continues at line 194 with the appearance of Beowulf. The section from line 194 to 669 is largely an establishment and trial of the protagonist. It also incorporates a further glorification of Hrothgar and his court. The security of the Danish kingdom and the carriage of its officers, the coast-guard and Wulfgar, are impressive. Characterization of Beowulf proceeds through all his social inter-relations, as discussed in 4.4, but his greatest test in this initial section comes in his confrontation with Unferth (ll. 499-610). His physical, military ability *per se* is questioned in the Breca match and his character or psychological strength is tested by the goading<sup>2</sup>. In both he succeeds and the poet, having established setting, sub-characters, a dire antagonist and a glorious protagonist, can proceed with the main narrative thread.

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2 As discussed previously, the Breca-tale allows Beowulf to present his special qualifications to Hrothgar for his fight with Grendel. This allows the poet to display Beowulf's remarkable abilities without having to offer a prescriptive, authorial passage on these. Further, it allows Beowulf to reveal the measure of his physical endurance and his courage without inordinate boasting.

It is here that the first of two mirror patterns begins<sup>3</sup>. From line 669 to 745 suspense of anticipation, fear and horror are built up before the Grendel fight. A similar pattern begins to develop from line 1240 to 1492 in the journey through the wasteland to meet with Grendel's mother.

From line 746 to 853 there is a release of this suspense in the excitement of combat and in the resolution. Similarly in lines 1493-1650 the tension finds its release in the fight and victory over Grendel's mother. From line 854 to 1240 there is an unwinding of the tension and excitement, as is found in lines 1650-2199, both being sequences of rejoicing after the two fights.

The patterning persists on closer examination. At the peak of each clash there is a significant place-change to the dramatic audience. At line 767 the focus moves from the interior of Heorot to the appalled Danes outside.

*Dryhtsele dynede;      Denum eallum wearð,  
ceasterbūendum,      cēnra gehwylcum,  
eorlum ealuscerwen, ...*

11. 767-769

At line 1591 the focus shifts to the waiting Danes and Geats at the edge of the mere.

*Sōna þæt gesāwon      snottre ceorlas,  
þāðe mid Hrōðgāre      on holm wliton,  
þæt waes yðgeblond      eal gemenged,  
brim blōde fāh.      Blondenfeaxe,*

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3 Please refer to DIAGRAM (i) 1 MIRROR PATTERN IN SECTION A, p. 131

*gomele ymb gōdne ongeador sprāecon,  
 þaet hig þaes aedelinges eft ne wēndon,  
 þaet hē sigehrēðig sēcean cōme  
 mārne þēoden; þā ðaes monige gewearð,  
 þaet hine sēo brimwylf ābroten haefde.*

11. 1591-1599

These two space-shifts retain and expand the tension of the climax just as it begins to fall. The tension is given a secondary impetus when the audience witnesses the fear and anxiety of the watchers on the shore.

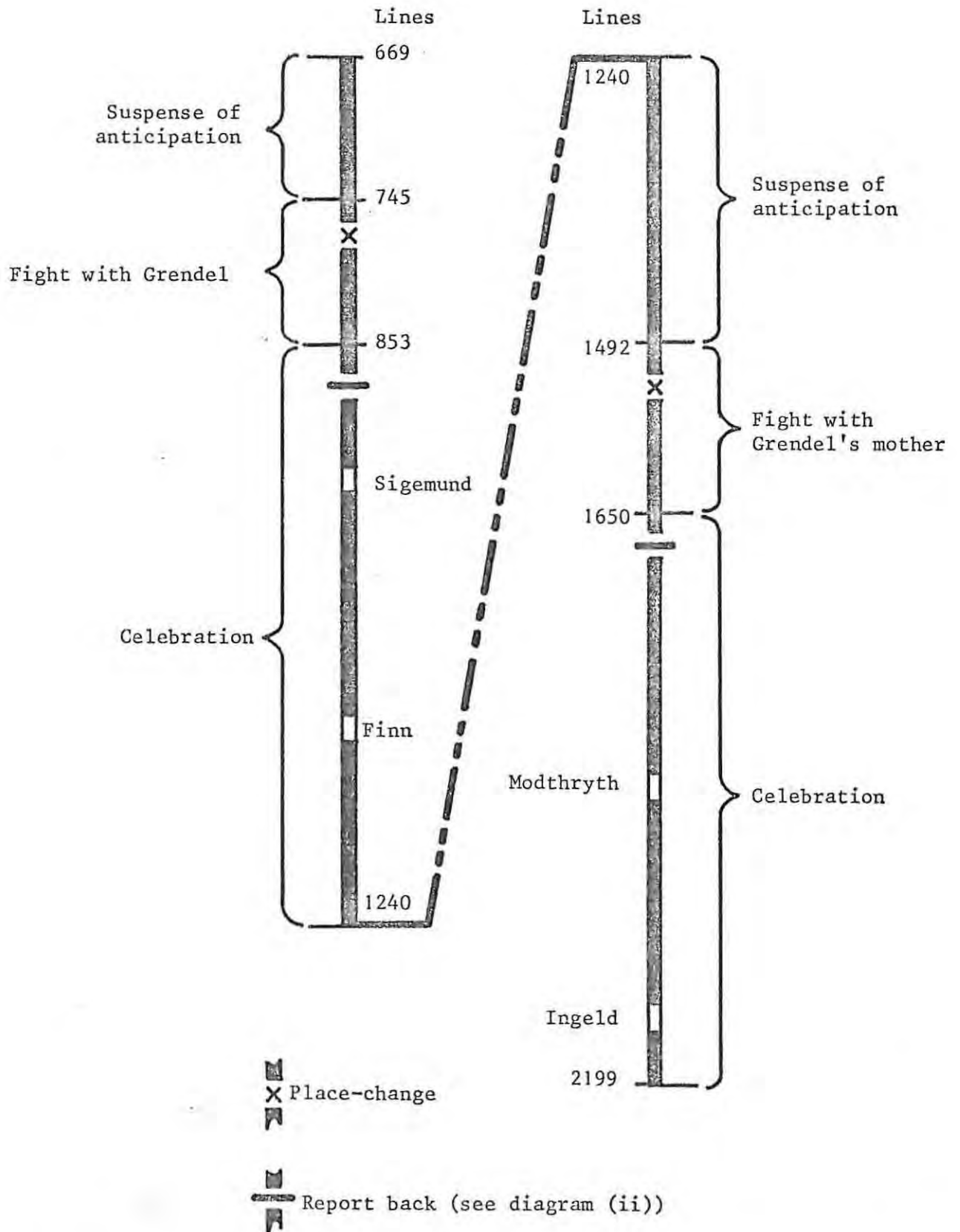
After each climax there occur two major digressions. After the Grendel fight Beowulf's prowess is paralleled with Sigemund's and the blood-feud is discussed in the Finn digression. After the fight with Grendel's mother Modthryth is used as a contrast and complement to Hygd and the blood-feud is again discussed in the Ingeld digression. The first two complementary digressions, Sigemund and Modthryth, are shorter and more direct in their allusion to the main narrative thread. Their major function is one of characterization. The more complex functions of the feuding digressions will be discussed at a later point.

Also after each climax occurs a commentary on the past action by the protagonist. This 'reporting back' to Hrothgar appears to assume a somewhat formalized pattern<sup>4</sup>. Both speeches are of approximately the same length, the first being 26 lines and the second 23 lines. They are both introduced by the formulaic phrase

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4 Please refer to DIAGRAM (ii): BEOWULF'S PATTERNED SPEECHES, p. 134.

DIAGRAM (i) : MIRROR PATTERN IN SECTION A



*Bēowulf* *māpelode*, *bearn Ecgþēowes*. After the formulaic introduction a formal statement of success is presented, each tacitly including an assurance of allegiance in *ēstum miclum* and *lustum*. This is followed by a comment on the difficulty of the deed, after which Beowulf offers a rapidly-moving commentary on the action. In both speeches God is presented as preventing something (l. 967 - *þā Metod nolde* and l. 1658 - *nyrdē mec God scylde*). At the conclusion of the speeches the return to a state of justice is stressed.

In both the spoils of the fight are particularly mentioned, yet both are peculiarly reduced. In the first Beowulf comes away with Grendel's arm, but not his whole person, albeit with his aim achieved (Grendel's ultimate death). In the second Beowulf brings only the hilt of the giant-made sword to the surface of the mere. The blade is dissolved by poisoned blood, but not before the sword accomplishes its function.

This last parallel illustrates an interesting technique employed by the poet (whether it be original or adopted from the poetic tradition). Ultimately the reduction of the spoils offers an index of the perniciousness of the enemy. Normally the whole booty would have been Beowulf's, but these are abnormal circumstances and it is to Beowulf's glory that he comes away with anything at all. It serves again to stress the point that only Beowulf could have been equal to such opponents, and then even he is only barely equal.

DIAGRAM (ii): BEOWULF'S PATTERNED SPEECHES

1. *Bēowulf* mabelode,    *bearn* *Ecghēowes*;
2. 'Wē *þaet* *ellenweorc*    *ēstum* *miclum*,  
*feohtan* *fremedon*,
3.                                    *frēcne* *genēōdon*  
*eafoō* *uncūþes*.    *Ūpe* *ic* *swīþor*,  
*þaet* *ōū* *hine* *silfne*    *gesēon* *mōste*,  
*fēond* *on* *fraetewum*    *fylwērigne!*
4. *Ic* *hine* *hraedlice*    *heardan* *clammum*  
*on* *wacbedde*    *wriþan* *þōhte*,  
*þaet* *hē* *for* *mundgripe*    *mīnum* *scolde*  
*licgean* *līfþysig*,    *būtan* *his* *lic* *swice*;  
*ic* *hine* *ne* *mīhte*,    *þā* *Metod* *nolde*,  
*ganges* *getwāeman*,    *nō* *ic* *him* *þaes* *georne* *aetfealh*,  
*feorhgentōlan*;    *waes* *tō* *foremīhtig*  
*fēond* *on* *fēþe*.
5.                                    *Hwaeþere* *hē* *his* *folme* *forlēt*  
*tō* *līfwraþe*    *lāst* *weardian*,  
*earn* *ond* *eaxle*;
6.                                    *nō* *þāer* *āenige* *swā* *þeah*  
*fēasceaft* *guma*    *frōfre* *gebohte*;  
*nō* *þy* *leng* *leofað*    *laðgeteona*  
*synnum* *geswenced*,    *ac* *hine* *sār* *hafað*  
*in* *nīdgripe*    *nearwe* *befongen*,  
*balwon* *bendum*;
7.                                    *ðāer* *abīdan* *sceal*  
*maga* *māne* *fāh*    *miclan* *dōmes*,  
*hū* *him* *scir* *Metod*    *scrīfan* *wille*.

ll. 957–979

1. *Bēowulf* mabelode,    *bearn* *Ecghēowes*;
2. 'Hwæt, wē þē þūs sǣlac,    sunu *Healfdenes*,  
*lēod* *Scyldinga*,    *lustum* *brōhton*  
*tīres* *tō* *tācne*,    *þē* *þū* *hēr* *tō* *lōcast*.
3. *Ic* *þaet* *unsōfte*    *caldre* *gedēgde*,  
*wigge* *under* *waetere*,    *weorc* *genēþde*  
*earfoðlice*;    *aetrihte* *waes*  
*guð* *getwāefed*,    *nymde* *mec* *God* *scylde*.
4. *Ne* *meahte* *ic* *aet* *hilde*    *mid* *Hruntinge*  
*wiht* *gewyrcan*,    *þeah* *þaet* *wāepen* *duge*;  
*ac* *mē* *geuðe*    *ylda* *Waldend*,  
*þaet* *ic* *on* *wāge* *geseah*    *wlitig* *hangian*  
*ealdsweord* *ēacen*    *-oftost* *wisode*  
*wīnigea* *lēasum-*,    *þaet* *ic* *ðy* *wāepne* *gebrāed*.  
*Ofsloh* *ða* *aet* *þāere* *saece*,    *þā* *mē* *sāel* *āgeald*,  
*hūses* *hyrdas*.    *Ðā* *þaet* *hildebil*  
*forbarn* *brogdenmāel*,    *swā* *þaet* *blōd* *gesprang*,  
*hātost* *haeþosswāta*.
5.                                    *Ic* *þaet* *hilt* *þanan*  
*fēondum* *aetferede*;
6.                                    *fyrendāeda* *wraec*,  
*dēaðcwealm* *Denigea*, *swa* *hit* *gedēfe* *waes*.
7. *Ic* *hit* *þē* *þonne* *gehāte*,    *þaet* *þū* *on* *Heorote* *mōst*  
*sorhlēas* *swefan*    *mid* *þūra* *secga* *gedryht*,  
*ond* *þegna* *gehwyrc*    *þīnra* *lēoda*,  
*duguðe* *ond* *iogoþe* *þū* *him* *ondrāedan* *ne* *þearft*,  
*þēoden* *Scyldinga*,    *on* *þā* *healfe*,  
*aldorbealu* *eorlum*,    *swā* *þū* *aer* *dydest*,

ll. 1651–1676

1. *Introductory formula*
2. *Statement of success*
3. *Statement of difficulty*
4. *Action*
5. *Spoils*
6. *Resolution*
7. *Return to Justice*

The tight structuring of Section A of *Beowulf* is in sharp contrast with Section B. Despite the significant amount of digressive material, which is discussed in 6.3 and 6.4, in this early section the main narrative thread remains dominant. Its repetitions and mirror patterning do not make for a static structure. It is a progression through variation. Differences in substance and point of view in repeated sequences allow for the constant development of new ideas. Although we see Grendel approach Heorot twice, once before Beowulf is present and once while Beowulf awaits him, the circumstances are so different and the poet's perspective so modified that the audience is always acquiring new information. The data of the Grendel fight is presented three times in Section A, but is considerably altered on each presentation. This tends to emphasize the means of presentation above the subject-matter and so contributes to characterization of the hero. Although the two fight sequences are so similar in structure, their substance is quite different. The very similarity in patterning seems to emphasize the variations.

## 6.2 The latter sections of the poem

When the sections of *Beowulf* occurring after line 2200 are compared with those before, a considerable change in structuring is apparent. Whereas the earlier sections, which I have designated A (i), (ii) and (iii), fall into a striking mirror pattern, Section B is extremely loose in structure. It is, in the mode of long 'oral' poems, typically diffuse and episodic. The digressive material, that is, discursive material falling outside

of the main narrative thread, occurs more frequently and more intrusively. The four steps in the main narrative thread: exposition, Beowulf's soliloquy, the fight itself, and Beowulf's death and funeral, are repeatedly interrupted by discursive material, often at crucial points in the narrative. Wiglaf's genealogy and history break into the climax of the dragon fight. The long Ravenswood tale forms part of Beowulf's death and funeral sequence. The elegiac speech of the last retainer falls in the initial stages of the exposition of the dragon<sup>5</sup>.

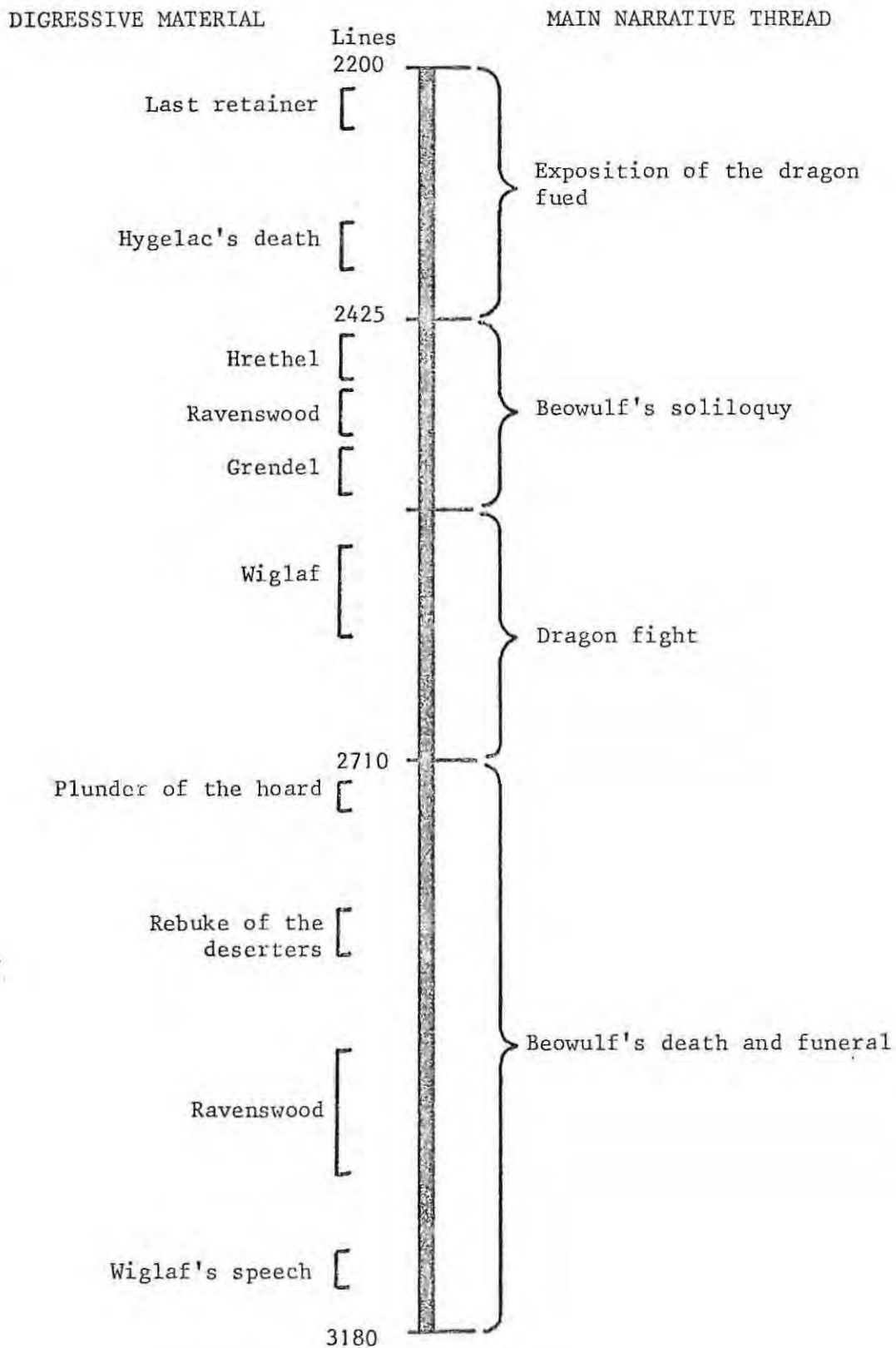
There is a similarity in the very basic structure of the main narrative thread of section B and the structure of the two fight sequences in A. Each has its exposition, its anticipatory suspense, its validation of the hero, the fight and its festal consequences. This is, however, a pattern inherent in the material; a basic form necessary for a tale of contest. Beyond this, section B is radically different from the earlier part of the poem.

It is not only the dissimilarity in the kind of monster, nor in the age and achievement of the hero in the latter section of the poem, which has made popular the hypothesis of separate authorship for this part. The form is considerably changed and section B has none of the neatness of A. Lawrence, writing in terms of folklore, finds the dragon sequence an 'addition':

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5 Please see DIAGRAM (iii) : SECTION B, p. 138.

## DIAGRAM (iii) : SECTION B



No one can tell just how the dragon came to be added to the tale. It seems probable that after the Bear's Son - slayer of two demonic beings ... - had been made into a great Scandinavian prince, and his adventures placed in an historic setting, a suitable and glorious death had to be provided for him. So the dragon was added. When a hero becomes popular, the story of his whole career is likely to be demanded.<sup>6</sup>

W.P. Ker, having claimed that the dragon provides a sequel to the dragon fight, 'which extends the poem, to the detriment of its proportions'<sup>7</sup>, also finds in the hero the only connecting feature:

The adventure with the dragon is separate from the earlier adventures. It is only connected with them because the same person is involved in both.<sup>8</sup>

Tolkien, also giving centrality to the hero, opposes Lawrence's and Ker's sequential views and claims the poem to be

... essentially a balance, an opposition of ends and beginnings. In its simplest terms it is a contrasted description of two moments in a great life, rising and setting; an elaboration of the ancient and intensely moving contrast between youth and age, first achievement and final death. It is divided in consequence into two opposed portions, different in manner and length ...<sup>9</sup>

Although I cannot wholly support Tolkien's emphasis on Beowulf as the supremely dominant aspect of the poem, his comments reveal his sensitivity to what Irving calls the 'emotional unity'<sup>10</sup> of

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6 Lawrence, *Beowulf and Epic Tradition*, p. 206.

7 Ker, *Epic and Romance* (London: Macmillan, 1908), p. 89.

8 Ker, *Epic and Romance*, p. 160.

9 Tolkien, 'Monsters and Critics', p. 81.

10 Irving, *A Reading of Beowulf*, p. 193.

the poem. There may be a sense of strain in linking the early fights with the dragon fight, or indeed of linking the young Beowulf with the old, even in opposition, but there is no strain in seeing a unity of ideas in *Beowulf*. The atmosphere, implications, themes and perhaps emotions of the Scyld funeral, the Finn legend, Ongentheow's death, Heorot's final demise and Beowulf's funeral fall naturally together.

It would seem that it is the tendency to see the hero and the main fights as dominant in the poem, that leads to dispute about its unity. If the digressive material is allowed to fill the frame, the dragon sequence is logical and necessary. Beowulf is an exemplary, rather than an individual being and should not be lifted out of his world and given too much personal scrutiny. Hence I would debate the wisdom of relying on the hero as a unifying factor. Beowulf is indubitably the core of the main narrative thread, but a significantly large proportion of the poem deals with the broader issues of the heroic world, the human condition in general and with the nature of evil. To perceive the logic of the dragon sequence we should observe these elements coming to fruition as well.

The digressive material in section B all deals with closure. The last retainer's speech echoes the themes and motifs of *The Wanderer*. It is a poignant eulogy on a dead *comitatus*. Hygelac's death (ll. 2354-2372) also is an ending of an era. The great love of Beowulf for his lord subtly permeates the earlier sections of

the poem, and in the latter part we look back at his glory. This motif of mortality is repeated in Hrethel's digression, in which both heir and ruler of *līfe gewāt* as the result of a tragic murder (ll. 2435-2471). Both Ravenswood digressions (ll. 2472-2489 and 2922-2999) point not only to the deaths of Haethcyn and Ongentheow, but also to the mortal threat of the Swedes to the Geatish nation. These three last digressions: Hygelac's death, Hrethel and Ravenswood further show the deaths of a succession of Geatish kings at the point where the present ruler's death is imminent. The plundering of the dragon's hoard underlines the end of his rule in his miserly hall and sustains the sense of foreboding for the Geats as a nation. We know the gold to be cursed and have at this stage already seen the dragon and Beowulf vanquished in possession of it. The rebuke of the deserters by Wiglaf and his final speech show the crumbling of Beowulf's *committatus*; honour itself is mortally threatened.

The fabric of the latter section of the poem is a mosaic of death, gloom and loss. As such it fulfills the foreboding which repeatedly appears in the early section. Just as section A pointedly prefigures the demise of the glory of the heroic world, so section B shows this happening. The wheel set slowly in motion with Scyld's funeral, gathers momentum in section A, and then haltingly slows down in B, stopping at the closure of the poem. As anticipated from the initial expository lines of the poem, we have seen the deeds of yore, and the motivations, functions and frailties of a lost era.

The hesitant, fragmentary structure of the latter section is eminently suited to its theme. The heroic tale of the dragon-vanquisher is not given the same foregrounding allowed to Grendel and his mother. The great back-drop of the heroic world is integrated into the main narrative thread in a far more intimate way than in section A. Its sorrows and frailties are constantly emphasized. Irving notes that section A examines what man *can do*, while section B concerns what he *cannot do*<sup>11</sup>. The ubiquity of evil suggested in the early sections finally becomes manifest in the dragon. A man who may, when vigorous, overcome the horror of the brood of Cain, finally must face mutability and mortality, and in meeting then with elemental evil, must fail. Beowulf carries his world and its values with him and, just as in the early sections, its fate is his own.

Seen in these terms the patterning of section A and the diffuseness of section B are a thematic and aesthetic necessity. Pamela Gradon, in an interesting comparison of the structures of *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, notes that we find the structure of the former poem obscure because links between non-causal and non-chronological narrative episodes that make up the poem are essentially thematic in nature.

To equate Beowulf with Scyld, we have to perform a process of abstraction. Only then can we understand the thematic relationship of the different parts of the poem.<sup>12</sup>

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11 Irving, *A Reading of Beowulf*, p. 196.

12 Gradon, *Form and Style*, p. 133.

Once these thematic correspondences are made, the structure of the poem emerges as a unity of ideas, motifs and values. The unity of *Beowulf* exists not in plot, characters, setting or even action, but in the poem's more submerged concerns. In this way the latter part of the poem is linked with the earlier parts, and sustains its own internal logic.

### 6.3 Digressive material

I should now like to examine the nature of the so-called digressions. It is now more readily accepted that the material of these episodes is neither wholly extraneous nor diverting from the central concerns of *Beowulf*<sup>13</sup>. Much controversy surrounds each episode and the primary cause of this is, I feel, the difficulty the modern reader finds in accepting a somewhat submerged and allusive progression of central ideas<sup>14</sup> (although strangely, not in material contemporary with him. It seems that the condemnation of this particular fluidity is largely reserved for early work, in which writers were not supposed to show expertise in what are now considered experimental techniques!)

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13 Adrien Bonjour, 'The Digressions in *Beowulf*', *Medium Aevum Monographs*, V (1950) and A.G. Brodeur, *The Art of Beowulf* (Berkeley: California Univ. Press, 1959, rpt. 1971).

14 The distinction between these and 'themes' is important in a discussion of *Beowulf*. Central ideas form a more basal constituent than do themes, which are derived from, but are peripheral to, the narrative thread. It may be said, for example that the central ideas of *Macbeth* deal with the usurpation of a throne and the psychic destruction of a guilt-ridden mind. The theme could be proposed to be a statement on the forces of evil operating upon frailty.

There are obvious bonds between the 'digressions' and the main narrative thread. This admission should be carried a step further. In fact, the bonds between the episodes and the main narrative thread are so firm that if these episodes were removed from the poem the very central ideas and essence of the poem would be distorted and reduced to triviality.

I shall attempt to show that those sections of the poem which are often construed as being peripheral to the main currents running through *Beowulf*, are in fact central. Their aesthetic, structural and thematic functions are as great as those of the monsters and indeed of Beowulf himself.

The historical and legendary identity of the protagonists within the episodes lie beyond the scope of this thesis<sup>15</sup>. My concern is to assess the function and effect of the lays within the poem as an artistic entity.

To begin a poem with a funeral amounts to an emphatic declaration of mood. The audience is immediately presented with the two dominating themes of *Beowulf*: glory and the mortality of glory. It cannot be asserted that the beginning of *Beowulf* is non-expository. The Scyld episode functions in more ways than as an allusion to, or a prefiguring of, Beowulf, the Geat's ultimate fate. I would

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15 Interesting discussions on this subject may be found in Chambers and in Klaeber.

hesitate to place all emphasis in the poem upon characterization and action, a reductive stance which renders the poem's digressive nature inexplicable. The funeral *is* essentially expository; it does prefigure future action but it goes further than this. It presents the audience with a concentrated summary of the prime concerns of the poem which are to follow.

In oral presentation exposition must be far more concise than it need be in other media, for example, in the novel, where significant information may be permitted to reveal itself gradually and vital points may be buried, for the reader is able to refer back and the problems of length of presentation are greatly reduced. Far greater economy is necessary when it is the ears which are the receptive media. Extraneous matter must be minimized and pertinent elements must be set in strategic positions.

In terms of presentation, the closest 'modern' genre to the long, orally-delivered poem, is drama. If one considers the condensed nature of the exposition in *Antony and Cleopatra* for example, the technique of immediate effusion of concepts can be observed.

Nay, but this dotage of our general's  
 O'erflows the measure: those his goodly eyes,  
 That o'er the files and musters of the war  
 Have glow'd like plated Mars, now bend, now turn  
 The office and devotion of their view  
 Upon a tawny front; his captains heart,  
 Which in the scuffles of great fights hath burst  
 The buckles on his breast, reneges all temper,  
 And is become the bellows and the fan  
 To cool a gypsies lust.

Act 1; sc i; ll. 1-10

The very first line gives us 'dotage', which refers not only to the situation which we are to observe for the next few hours, but also to the Roman view of the situation. 'O'erflows the measure' introduces us to the concept of Roman moderation, its sense of bounds and to the contrasting elements of a pattern of imagery which is to run throughout the play: that of the fluid Nilotic cosmos and of the mathematical, logical Roman order. Antony's god-like stature is next presented in military terms, again with rigid imagery (in 'files and musters' and 'plated') and is contrasted with his now 'deteriorated' state of bending and turning - both elements of Cleopatra's world.

Thus in the initial speech of the play we have the germ of its being. The two chief forces at work are already present together with the nuances of their working. We see the possession of Antony by a force that alters the very function of his eyes; it is not Antony's will or mind that is altered but his senses that have been possessed. In the Mars parallel we are able to estimate the potency of this force, able to overwhelm the god of War's likeness by its mere presence. We know from this first speech that Antony's will is passive before it, and we can expect, given his previous mode of behaviour here, to see the struggle between mind and heart, duty and indulgence, honour and love, society and nature.

Now let us turn to the first lines of *Beowulf* and attempt to assess whether its exposition approaches the conciseness of the Shakespeare.

HWAET, WĒ GĀR-DĒna in gēardagum,  
 þēodcýninga þrym gefrūnon,  
 þū ðā aefelingas ellen fremedon!

11. 1-3

The first word unequivocally sets the spirit of the poem. *Hwaet*, normally translated as 'Lo!' effuses a reverence due to matters of noteworthy import. It stimulates a sense of anticipation of great tidings. I would tend to accept this translation with this particular set of connotations since other renderings of *hwaet* 'surely', 'certainly', 'well!', do not oblige quite as nicely the epic mode.

The next word *wē* establishes the relationship of the narrator with the audience and defines their mutual stance toward the subject-matter. Important to these relationships is the sense of *in gēardagum*. The listening audience is categorically removed from the subject of the poem and is asked to identify with its teller. They are asked to share his perspective, his opinions and his values, and the intimacy of *wē* allows a deduction that he and his audience must needs share an outsider's view of the world he is about to present.

An historical reference group with which the audience was bound to be familiar is immediately presented. The *þēodcýninga Gardena* supply the audience with another time-reference and a specific place-reference. The narrator announces that he will deal with familiar material and that he will deal with glorious deeds of a

nobility. In a parallel pattern these two vital elements, nobility and glory are repeated. Lines 2a and 3a stress status and breeding, while 2b and 3b introduce glory and valour respectively. Yet qualifying this pattern, before the elevation of the proposed subject-matter, the audience reaction is channelled by the sense of mortality established by *in gēardagum*. Nostalgia, a sense of fate and a hint of tragedy are all incipient in these first three lines.

Then we proceed to Scyld, legendary founder of the Danish dynasty, to consider his glory and mortality. The essential problem with the exposition is that its setting and reference are not those of the hero. It is some 194 lines before the protagonist is introduced. Now this may well be evidence of a refined sense of dramatic impact. However, there is a certain flaw in this construction, if it is a design for dramatic impact - we have two Beowulfs. Surely within the hypothesis of contrived impact, the poet would not have punctured Beowulf's 'entrance' by including a namesake before the dramatic moment. Chamber's argument that the poem, in an earlier version, actually dealt with Beowulf, the Dane, would seem logical. However the modification in chronology, genealogy and plot would have to be so radical as to render the poem barely recognizable. Our concern should be with the poem as it stands and as such, the inclusion of two unrelated Beowulfs seems a dramatic error, inexplicable if one gives full centrality to the hero.

It is in fact the tendency of some critics to focus primarily upon the protagonist, which allows many misinterpretations of the poem. If the reader opens the text expecting an examination of a legendary hero's life, he will find himself disappointed and rather perplexed by the last line. More seriously, he will have been deprived of an understanding of the real concerns of *Beowulf*. It is unfortunate that the imposed title of the poem has been so ardently adopted, for it requires none. The opening lines are sufficient to suggest the concerns of the work, and indeed offer the modern reader a contradiction of the 'pointer' given him on the cover of his volume. Klaeber pays tribute to and endorses the initiators of the poem's 'Christening':

'... since the days when Sharon Turner, J.J. Conybeare and N.F.S. Grundtvig first designated it as 'the Poem of Beowulf', it has been regularly, and most appropriately, named after its great hero.'<sup>16</sup>

Yet, one would wish that Klaeber's superior and widely-used edition had lacked a title, or had stressed that the name was used as a convenience. It is for this latter reason and as a traditional obligation, that critics adopt the title *Beowulf*, but it must be borne in mind that the manuscript does not thus commit itself, and nor should the reader.

Andreas Haarder suggests:

'... the poem might be entitled *To Be Man*, or, to stress the radicality of the nightmare challenge that sends him acting: *To Be Monster*. Perhaps the true title is *Beonwulf*'<sup>17</sup>.

16 Klaeber, *Beowulf*, pp. ci-cii.

17 Andreas Haarder, *Beowulf: The Appeal of a Poem* (Viborg: Akademisk Forlag, Norhaven Bogtrykkeri, 1975), p. 239.

These are interesting suggestions, but are in fact most useful in that they reiterate the ultimate redundancy and hypothetical nature of any title. The imposition of a name on the poem by a critic is dangerous precisely because it reflects that critic's interpretation and his *Zeitgeist*, not the poem's.

It is a striking aspect of *Beowulf* that we begin most emphatically with the end. The prefigurative technique assumes several different modes in *Beowulf*, the most dominant of these being prefiguration by parallelism, that is, the direction of the narrative thread is predicted in an incident of similar patterning. When the patterning, or the aggregation of elements presented, becomes evidently similar for the second time, our expectation carries us through the development. This is a primary function of the funeral of Scyld which begins the poem. Scyld is presented as a glorious saviour of his people, an unknown warrior who comes from over the sea to unite and bolster the Danes, and who has at last succumbed to the destiny of all men. We are immediately made aware by association of the essential mortality of Beowulf and of all things. A subservience of the world of *Beowulf* to a power beyond human control is established in these initial stages and develops throughout the poem.

As Northrop Frye argues:

'... such a device (the introduction of an omen or portent, or the device of making the whole story the fulfilment of a prophesy given at the beginning) suggests, in its existential projection, a conception of

ineluctable fate or hidden omnipotent will. Actually, it is a piece of pure literary design, giving the beginning some symmetrical relationship with the end, and the only eluctable will involved is that of the author.<sup>18</sup>

It would seem that Scyld's funeral is a conscious introduction of that pervading essence which we find in *Beowulf*; the sense of the inevitable, a sense of doom. God and *wyrd* have been inextricably tangled in *Beowulf*, but the Christian doctrine, as interpreted today, cannot be held to be the governing set of principles of the poem. The sense of ending which the very tense of the introductory lines of *Beowulf* suggests is not viewed in the Christian perspective. This is a tale of *wyrd* and *lof*, of pagan doom unassuaged by hopes of resurrection. We are made aware even before we are introduced to Beowulf that he is part of a dying world, and, like all its elements, will also be subject to fate.

Irving, endorsing the popular concept of the Scyld incident as somewhat extraneous to the main flow of *Beowulf* suggests:

Perhaps then the Scyld story, often called a prologue or a proem, has a function a little like that of the prologue of an Elizabethan play in the way it briefly hints not only at the outline of the action to follow but at the emotions appropriate to that action.<sup>19</sup>

Nevertheless the statement does approach my convictions regarding the beginning of *Beowulf*. The section is more than a prefiguration,

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18 Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism, Four Essays* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton Univ. Press, 1957), p. 139.

19 Edward B. Irving, *Introduction to Beowulf* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1968), p. 36.

more than a prologue. It is a studied exposition, presenting the audience with central ideas, primary atmosphere and above all the set of values appropriate to the poem. Booth maintains that:

... any story will be unintelligible unless it includes, however subtly, the amount of telling necessary not only to make us aware of the value system which gives it its meaning but, more important, to make us willing to accept that value system, at least temporarily.<sup>20</sup>

The *Beowulf* poet has satisfied this obvious need in a remarkable manner. The power and fulfilment of the heroic life and the tragedy of mortality which we are to observe in greater detail are here in germinal state. The heroic ethos is introduced by elevating authorial comment (*weorðmyndum þāh./ þæt waes gōd cyning! / gōde gewyrcean*) and by concrete illumination in a narrated incident. Yet even before these values are presented, the audience is told that they are no longer wholly applicable, for the golden age is past (*in gēardagum*). In this way we are prepared for the subtle negation of these values which the poem as a whole presents.

This aspect of authorial tone can be further illuminated by the Unferth incident. The Unferth problem *per se* is dealt with most ably by Brodeur<sup>21</sup> and I do not intend to explicate further Unferth's character, position and function, but rather to inves-

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20 Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: Chicago Univ. Press, 1961), p. 112.

21 Brodeur, *The Art of Beowulf*, Chapter VI.

tigate the integration of the incident in the poem as a whole. The interlude does not stand outside the main narrative thread and does not constitute a break in the logic of linear progression. It evolves out of the plot and develops it further. Nevertheless, the somewhat lengthy attention (some 100 lines) which the poet affords the incident, and his repeated references to it at lines 980, 1165, 1807, 1659, 1522, 1490 and 1455 ff. is interesting. It would seem that the confrontation has some wider significance than is easily apparent to the modern audience. I tend to agree with Brodeur<sup>22</sup> that the discrepancy between the poet's condemning attitude towards Unferth

<i>Unferth mape lode,</i>	<i>Ecglāfes bearn,</i>
<i>þē aet fōtum saet</i>	<i>frēan Scyldinga,</i>
<i>onband beadurūne -</i>	<i>waes him Bēowulfes sīð,</i>
<i>mōdges mere faran,</i>	<i>micel aefþunca,</i>
<i>forþon þe hē ūþe,</i>	<i>þaet aenig oðer man</i>
<i>āefre māerða þon mā</i>	<i>mid dangeardes</i>
<i>gehēde under heofenum</i>	<i>þonne hē sylfa</i>

11. 499-505

and Beowulf's obvious acceptance of him points to a dramatic irony.

The poet and his intended audience have an awareness of Unferth beyond that of Beowulf. The protagonist cannot know of Unferth's supposed later activities and thus honourably receives the hand of friendship. The poet has a good reason for his dislike of Unferth and he expects the audience to share this knowledge. He treats the Hroþulf conspiracy and the fall of Heorot with equal allusiveness and it is possible that Unferth had a part in one of these affairs.

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22 Brodeur, p. 153.

If this indeed is the case, the Unferth interlude would have been far more heavily weighted for the original audience than for us. The futility of Beowulf's early efforts against the Grendel family becomes far more strongly emphasized in the light of this hypothesis. The swift allusion at lines 82-85

... heaðowylma bād,  
 lāðan līges;    ne wæs hit lenge þā gēn,  
 þæt se ecghete    āþumswēoran  
 aefter waelmāðe    wæcnan scolde.

moves to a far more significant position in the narrative. Heorot is doomed and it is not salvation that we witness in the Grendel conquest, but merely a temporary respite. Moreover, we are shown the heroic force of good misled and illusioned by the very agent of evil.

It is elements such as these in *Beowulf* which militate against the importance of the action and the centrality of the hero. The bright thread of the hero's activities becomes feeble in the gathering gloom. The forces of evil, of malicious violence, jealousy and hatred are constantly re-affirmed, particularly at points in the narrative when security, joy and honour reach a peak. Paradoxically, the further we permit Beowulf to recede from the spotlight, the more heroic his deeds become. As a futile, temporary stay against rampant malice, his glory and his pathos are enhanced.

The tendency should, however, not progress so far as to deny the importance of characterization and definition of the protagonist. Beowulf, or preferably the Beowulf phenomenon, is obviously one of the most significant elements in the poem. The Sigemund

'digression' functions primarily in this way: it provides an overt ratification of the hero in terms of his deeds and foreshadows his destruction. The lay is an explicit praise-parallel to Beowulf's victory over Grendel. This seemingly simple connection of two great heroes carries with it many other implications by contrast and comparison, for it prefigures Beowulf's dragon encounter and his kingship.

1. Beowulf, by his deed, qualifies as a hero of the same rank as Sigemund, the greatest of heroes of whom the poet says:

*Sē waes wreccena wīde māerost  
ofer werpēode, wīgendra hlēo,  
ellendāedum ...*

1. 898ff.

Bonjour<sup>23</sup> calls this the 'consecration' of Beowulf and it is the most explicit glorification up to this point by the poet. To imply that his protagonist might challenge Sigemund's glory is bolder than the statement which precedes the lay:

*paette sūð nē norð monig oft gecwaeð,  
ofer eormengrund be sām twēonum  
under swegles begong oþer nāenig  
rondhaebbendra, rīces wyrðra.*

11. 857-861

The statement is moreover lent a hypothetical air by the *monig oft gecwaeð*.

2. Further it is implied that, like Sigemund who proves his worth by slaying the dragon single-handed:

<sup>23</sup> Bonjour, *Digressions*, p. 47.

...                    *āna genēðde*  
*frēcne dāēde,*        *ne waes him Fiteġa mid;*

11. 888-889

Beowulf no longer exists as a mere thane under Hygelac's shadow. By his heroism he has become 'most worthy of a kingdom'. In this way the interlude functions as one of the first of many subtle pointers to Beowulf's ruling validity.

3. Although we have no extant evidence, we can rationally expect that *Beowulf*, at least in bare plot elements, was an oft-told tale. Consequently Beowulf's destiny as a king and as a victim of a dragon can be assumed to be anticipated at this point. The audience, if alert, would then be aware of the dragon parallel in Sigemund's tale, and of its tragic differences from Beowulf's history. Both slay dragons *under hārne stān* (l. 887 and l. 2553) and both of these worms are treasure guardians (l. 887 *hordes hyrde* and l. 2304 *beorges hyrde*). Both heroes achieve immortal renown and an after-life in the minds and mouths of men, but there the similarity ends. Despite the people's desire, Sigemund never rules and Beowulf does. Although Beowulf kills the dragon he does not live, as Sigemund does, 'to enjoy the ringhord at his own will'. While it is Sigemund's dragon which tastes the fire, *wyrm hāt gemealt*, it is Beowulf's body that crumbles on the pyre, *hāt on hreðre*. It is one of the Beowulf poet's most distinctive characteristics that no opportunity for tragic irony is overlooked. Almost inevitably 'digressive' material functions as a means to create a tragic irony by a play in near parallelism to the main narrative thread.

4. Finally, the first of two contrasts is drawn here between Beowulf and Heremod. The poet is always careful to demonstrate that it is not only the monsters, the children of Cain, who are evil, but that each of the race of men embodies a potential Cain. The contrast between the active good and the active bad in the two men is again drawn by Hrothgar. It seems a great fear that a young hero might achieve fame and regal position by his actions and then deteriorate morally. It is this that Hrothgar warns Beowulf against, citing the catalyst in the degeneration as pride. The centrality of Hrothgar's 'sermon' in the poem and his allusion to Heremod, suggests that we should not overlook the second part of the *scop's* tale (l. 898ff.).

It may be proposed that there is a finely interwoven mesh of allusion and motif in this little section. The 'funeral' of Sigemund's dragon is curiously like Scyld's. Heremod is Scyld's predecessor<sup>24</sup>, whose rule led to the chaos from which Scyld redeems the Danish people. The two dragons (one mentioned and one pre-figured) represent the chaos of the Cain ethos, while Scyld, Sigemund and Beowulf are associated as the positive forces against this chaos. The mention of Heremod occurs after both victories over the Grendel family, with significant stress laid upon the king's intrinsic evil. He functions as an explicit reminder that evil is not the premise only of distorted monsters, but of men also, even of the most noble. There exists a vast distance between

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24 Chambers, *Introduction*, p. 89.

a Grendel and a royal king of the Danes, and the implication made is that evil is appallingly ubiquitous. Even Beowulf may not escape it.

#### 6.4 Further Digressive Material and the Bloodfeud

I link many of the 'digressions' together under the above title since it seems that this is a key to them all, and in fact a key to an understanding of the essence of *Beowulf*. At least one third of the poem comprises material which stands apart from the main thread in terms of time and space. The popular tendency to separate this material from the main narrative thread and then to strive ingeniously to integrate it again in terms of meaning, is in my opinion a major cause of the interpretive distortions from which the poem suffers. Rather this 'different' material should be given greater centrality by the critic. Indeed, the fascination of the episodes is in many ways greater than that of the monster fights. The emphasis upon the 'political' narratives, and the tone in which they are presented, contributes very extensively to the meaning of the poem. They alter *Beowulf* from a legend about a noble monster-killer, to a study of a world and its ethos. The problems of conflict and rule are the major focus of these narratives and as such the blood-feud achieves its prominence.

Feuding is also a central motif in the main narrative thread. The Grendel fight is discussed in terms of feud and *wergild*:

...      *sibbe ne wolde*  
*wið manna hwone      maegenes Deniga,*  
*feorhbealo feorran,      fēa þingian,*  
*nē þær nāenig witenā      wēnan þorfte*  
*beorhtre bōte      tō banan folmum;*

Grendel's mother acts within the feuding pattern and avenges the blood of her child with the blood of Aeschere. She is called *wrecend*. Her motives, more honourable<sup>25</sup> than those of Grendel, are clearly stated:

*Onð his mōdor þā gýt  
gīfre ond galgmod gegān wolde  
sorhfulne sīð, sunu dēoð wrecan.*

11. 1276-1278

Beowulf's reaction to this is not a desire to end the monster nuisance at Heorot, but a cry of vengeance again:

*Sēlre bið āeghwāem,  
þæt hē his frēond wrece, þonne hē fela murne.*

11. 1384-1385

Similarly the dragon's motivation to ravage the Geatish countryside is one of vengeance:

*waes ðā gebolgen beorges hyrde,  
wolde se lāða līge forgyldan  
drincfaet dýre.*

11. 2304-2306

And vengeance is Beowulf's recourse against the dragon:

*... him ðaes gūðkyning,  
Wedera þrōden wraece leornode.*

11. 2335-2336

It is then perfectly logical that this primary element of the main narrative thread should be explored in further depth in the

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25 She is, in several ways, less depraved than her son. She seizes only one of the unprepared, post-festal Danes, while Grendel rapidly swallows one man and moves on to the next. Moreover, she shows some faint delicacy in leaving Aeschere's head lying near her lair, whereas Grendel is stressed as having *unlyfigendes eal gefeormod, fēt ond folma*.

'digressional' matter. What renders the recurring discussions on vengeance so interesting in *Beowulf* is the poet's vision of this violent justice. Characteristically he reveals the futility, the tragedy and the pathos of the feud. It is this more than anything else in the poem that questions the glory and reflects ironically upon honour. All that is achieved by the feuds of the main narrative thread is renown for Beowulf. Heorot is doomed despite its purgation and the Geats are left infinitely worse off after the death of the dragon.

Fine narrative skill has knit the heroic lays of Finnesburg and Ingeld into the fabric of *Beowulf*. They are made to function primarily as illuminations of circumstances in the main narrative thread. The context in which the lays appear should be constantly borne in mind.

Hrothgar, in his enthusiasm for Beowulf, establishes the potential for a feud, a tension which Wealtheow hastens to alleviate. She hears that her lord proposes to adopt Beowulf as a son, so threatening the legacy of her own children. She discreetly suggests that no assurance of the throne be given Beowulf:

*'Mē man saegde,      þæt þū ðe for sunu wolde  
hererinc habban.      Heorot is gefāelsod,  
bēahsele beorhta;      brūc þenden þū mōte  
manigra mēdo,      ond þīnum māgum lāef  
folc ond rīce, þonne ðū forð scyle,  
methodsceaft seon.'*

11. 1175-1180

Beowulf himself reinforces this desire for peaceful co-existence with the Danes in a declaration of allegiance to Hrethric, Hrothgar's son:

'Gif him þonne Hrēþrīc to hofum Gēata  
 gēþinged þēodnes bearn, hē maeg þāer fela  
 frēonda findan; feorcūþde bēoð  
 sēlran gesōhte þāem þe him selfa dēah.'

ll. 1836-1839

Wealthew's speech serves also as a tactful reminder to Hrothulf, the future rebel and murderer of her son, of all the favours he has received at the court. This indeed is an important function of women; that they be peace-weavers.

In simple societies each man was an economic asset to the community. While to wage war was an effective means of establishing supremacy, it involved a loss of manpower and gradually undermined the society. A more permanent and sounder method was to force one's aggressors into a state of subjection by making them beholden to or dependent on one. This could be done by giving substantial gifts, a principle very active in *Beowulf* and in Anglo-Saxon society. The greatest gift one could give was a life, an individual, and even better, a life productive of more lives, i.e. a woman. Thus intermarriage was accepted as a basic method of cessation of hostilities. Marriage of one vengeance group into another created a state of conflicting loyalties; honour and love were forced into juxtaposition and ideally ensured an interest in securing peace instead of insisting on blood for blood. However, the balance of emotion is necessarily delicate and the love for the woman may not be sufficient to snuff out the ingrained sense of outrage. As the *Beowulf* poet so often emphasizes, these political allegiances by intermarriage frequently placed the bride in a tragic situation.

The incident mentioned above concerning the alleviation of a potential feud between Hrethric and Beowulf and/or Hrothulf occurs directly after the significant recital of the Finnesburg lay, which can be said to be the causal effective of Wealtheow's speech. The fact that this tale is sung in the hall, at a banquet attended by Hrothgar and Beowulf indicates that it is of great meaning and significance. Its connection with the main strain of narrative is far more complex than the direct comparison earlier of Beowulf with Sigemund. The emphasis falls on the elemental passions of love, hatred and ambition. It stresses the destructive nature of custom and demonstrates the distressing dangers to a society bound by a convention which is so ruthless with the lives of men and women.

It is accepted that the audience is well acquainted with the tale and the elements of action and narrative are glossed over, leaving the focus on human suffering. Such condemnation of the blood-feud is common in the Anglo-Saxon period. The church was the chief adversary of vengeance<sup>25</sup>, but no effective alternative was as yet at

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25 Dorothy Whitelock states that 'It is true that the Church threw the weight of its authority to support the practice of settling feuds by the payment of wergilds instead of by the actual taking of vengeance, and that the law tried to put some pressure on the offender to make him pay compensation for his deed. But even if the combined efforts of Church and State had been completely effective, there would remain the problem of the poor man of a poor kindred, who could not pay the wergild ... In such cases, and also when, as frequently happened, passions were too enraged for peaceful settlement to be acceptable, the vengeance was allowed to take its course ... killing for the sake of vengeance was not felt to be incompatible with Christian ethics ... in Anglo-Saxon times', *Audience of Beowulf*, p. 13.

hand. For those who require evidence of didactic intent in a text preserved by the religious orders, the Finn legend serves excellently. The tragic import of the situation is underlined and the tone of the poet is one of considered condemnation.

*Nē hūru Hildeburh herian þorfte  
 Eotena trēowe; unsynnum wearð  
 beloren leofum aet þām lindplegan  
 bearnum ond brōðrum; hīe on gebyrd hruron  
 gāre wunde; þaet waes geōmuru ides!*

ll. 1071-1075

The position of the lay of Finn in the poem is further evidence of the genius of the *Beowulf* poet in drawing parallels with the effect of tragic irony. The past tragedy of Queen Hildeburg is told in the presence of a queen, herself of another people from those of her husband and whose efforts to keep the peace were destined to come to naught. The audience would have no difficulty in predicting this circumstance, which makes her efforts in ll. 1170-1189 quoted above all the more pathetic. Her daughter, Freawaru also was fated to follow the same tragic course. The close juxtaposition of the Finn legend with a focus on the explosive situation in the Danish court is a deliberate attempt to awaken pity and fear for the destiny of the innocent protagonists of the main narrative thread.

It may be inferred from the allusive treatment that the poet gives the feud in Heorot, that the audience were well acquainted with the tale. Not five lines after the close of the tragic lay, the poet presents the ominous innuendoes:

... þær þā gōdan twēgen  
 sāeton suhtergefaederan; þā gýt waes hiera sib aetgaedere,  
 āeghwylc oðrum trywe.

11. 1163-1165

*Widsith* echoes the situation, but sadly goes no further than does

*Beowulf*:

Hroþpulf 7 Hroðgar heoldon lengest  
 sibbe aetsomne, suhtorfaedran,  
 sibþan hy forpraecon ðicinga cynn  
 7 Ingeldes ord forbigdan,  
 forheopan aet Heorote Heaðobeardna þrym,  
 11. 45-49<sup>26</sup>

The seating positions in the hall are carefully observed; Hrothulf with Hrothgar, and Unferth of dubious integrity at his feet, while Hrothgar's heirs sit at a lesser table with Beowulf and the younger warriors. Despite the feast the air is fraught with tension and the poet uses this very banquet to stress again the futility of this great court against the surges of intrigue and bloodshed.

The poet deals with the Heathobeardan feud with similar virtuosity and to excellent double purpose. It is seen as an accurate political prediction by Beowulf. At this stage in the poem it becomes necessary to vindicate Beowulf's kingly qualities. He has been proved a mighty warrior and now the assessment of Freawaru's state in 11. 2024-2069 reveals him as sage. Once again the poet uses a tale well known to the audience with a directive focus, this time upon Beowulf himself, showing him to have clear insight into the nature

26 Chambers, ed., *Widsith: A Study in Old English Heroic Legend* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1965), p. 205.

of the dangers inherent in the hazardous policies used to block the progression of a blood-feud.

Secondly the incident is of course, a study on the tragic character of the feud itself. The emphasis falls upon the symbolic nature of weaponry. Here the weapons of the Danes are established as an embodiment of the divided interests of the two parties. To the Danes they are symbols of victory and instruments of peace for the protection of Freawaru, but to the Heathobeards they are an inciting insult, their own captured legacy.

In the Ingeld incident the ignominious aspects of the feud are particularly stressed. The revenge is dark, secret and underhand, which is a marked divergence from other narratives dealing with the same subject<sup>27</sup>, an alteration which we must consider deliberate. It seems that the poet has most purposely stripped the expiation for blood of its glory and nobility. Saxo's tale is very different in plot elements, but even more striking is the attitude to vengeance. Starkad's incitement is viewed with positive approval:

Now he prevailed so well by this stirring counsel,  
that his reproach served like a flint wherewith to  
strike a blazing flame of valour in the soul that had  
been chill and slack. For the king (Ingeld) had at first  
heard the song inattentively; but stirred by the earnest  
admonition of his guardian, he conceived in his heart a  
tardy flame of revenge.<sup>28</sup>

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27 Chambers, *Introduction*, pp. 20-25.

28 Saxo Grammaticus, *The First Nine Books of the Danish History of Saxo Grammaticus*, trans. Oliver Elton (London: David Nutt, p. 257.

The incitor of the *Beowulf* version is subtly condemned by the poet:

*eald aescwiga, ...  
 onginneð geōmormōd      geongum cempa  
 þurh hreðra gehygd      higes cunnian,  
 wīgbealu weccan,      ond þæt word āwyð:*

11. 2042-2045

And the first act of vengeance is a nasty little criminal affair:

*...      oð ðæt sǣl cymed,  
 þæt se fǣmnan þegn      fore faeder dǣdum  
 aefterscylles bite      blōdfāg swefed,  
 ealdres scyldig;      him se oðer þonan  
 losað lifigende,      con him land geare.*

11. 2058-2062

These condemnations are placed in Beowulf's mouth, and so the digression shows us, not only a man capable of accurate political assessment, but also one who would strive for peace and compromise.

This is not the only time that the hero gives voice to the tragic nature of the feud. As the poem progresses the poet's and the protagonist's voices tend to merge. It eventually becomes redundant for the narrating voice to stand in an objective relationship to Beowulf. The poet has already strongly vindicated his assessment of the hero. At line 2435ff. Beowulf dwells upon the basest feud in the poem: that between Hrethel's sons, when Haethcyn shoots his brother, lord and friend, Herebeald. Because of their close relationship, their sib or vengeance groups are identical and no vengeance can be honourably executed. Hrethel is depicted as being in the saddest of positions, not being able to avenge the blood of a son upon another son and chooses himself to withdraw from life in melancholy. Despite the allegedly acci-

dental nature of the killing, *miste mercelses ond his māeg ofscēt* (l. 2439), the incident is referred to as a *fāehð*. This murder, with no means of compensation, either in *wergild* or blood, allows the poet to deal with the emotional consequences of violence in great detail. Some thirty lines are devoted to Hrethel's grief, a significant contribution to the notable emphasis on feuding in this section of the poem (just before the dragon fight).

It is Hrethel's death that precipitates Ravenswood. Beowulf blames the Swedes for ambush and treachery, but some 450 lines later, the herald of Beowulf's death blames the Geats for provocation:

*þā for ormedlan      āerest gesōhton*  
*Gēata lēode      Gūð-Scilfingas.*

11. 2926-2927

Ongentheow's actions are reported in more heroic terms than those of the Geats. Hygelac's stature is enhanced as a saviour of his doomed and depressed countrymen listening in the dark to Ongentheow's threats, but it is the aged Swedish king, fighting with his back to the wall against two young gallants at once, whom the narrator most admires.

Hygelac's rewarding of Eofor after the battle at Ravenswood calls forth a justification from the poet:

...                      - *ne ðorfte him ðā lēan oðwītan*  
*mon on middangearde,      syððan hīe ðā māerða geslōgon*  
11. 2995-2996

This seems an attempt to absolve Hygelac from complicity in an ignominious Geatish venture.

The difference between Beowulf's and the later messenger's attitudes towards Ravenswood, readily reveals the divergent functions of the two allusions. At lines 2472ff. Ravenswood is useful as a glorification of Geatish strength and Hygelac is depicted as the righteous avenger of Haethcyn's death upon Ongentheow. Further, Beowulf remembers the battle and it is apparent that during his fifty years of rule, no Swede has dared to pay recompense to the Geats for Ongentheow's death. However, the messenger is aware that fifty years is insufficient to erase the desire for vengeance of so humiliating a defeat. The Swedes have merely been waiting for the Geats to be deprived of their great leader.

*þæt ys sīð fāehðo    onð se fēondscipe,  
waelnīð wera,    ðæs ðe ic wēn hafo,  
þē ūs sēceað tō    Swēona lēoda,  
syððan hīe gefricgeað    frēan ūserne  
ealdorlēasne ...*

11. 2999-3003

Vengeance is further expected from the Frisians for Hygelac's raid. The memory lingers of Ecgtheow's feud with the Wylfings, and the consequences of Beowulf's bloody ascent to the throne now threaten. The snow-balling nature of the feud is thus apparent, and its complexity and fatality become most clearly manifest with the fall of kings. In spite of the network of inter-marriages, ambition and honour override all allegiances. Custom and peace fall apart with the death of Beowulf and the gloom of fatality and destruction descends upon the Geatish people. Their fate is prefigured by the last retainer's speech over the cursed hoard in lines 2236ff. His whole tribe has been vanquished by *gūoðēað* and *feorhbealo frēcne*, and, like the wanderer of the

Exeter Book, he poignantly lists the joys of life now lost. The obligations and pleasures of the heroic life, and above all, its self-destructive frailty discussed in this passage, form a prologue to the *dénouement*, in which we see all the glory that was Beowulf distil into a three-line tribute:

*cwāedon þæt hē wære      wyruldcyninga*  
*manna mildust      ond monðw æerust,*  
*lēodum līðost      ond lofgeornost.*

11. 3180-3182

Thus in both the main narrative thread and the 'digressions' the same concerns emerge. While the hero, Wiglaf, Scyld, Hygelac and Heorot itself affirm the struggling positive heroic values, the forces of chaos manifested in the monsters and corrupted man, seize every opportunity to challenge the good. It is both valid and reductive to say that *Beowulf* 'is about heroism'. The poem is a study of chaos and the tragedy of middle-earth, where all honour, all glory and all striving have a fine futility. In this setting the blood-feud motif embodies the essence of the heroic ethos. The institution calls for honour, glory and striving, but is ultimately futile and even self-destructive. The poet presents his audience with a subtle balance between elevation of the heroic code and his ironic vision of it. All action in the poem is a magnificent failure and finally, it is not the deeds of *gēardagum* but their striving spirit that the poet endorses. Lee concludes his discussion of the *Beowulf* poet's tragic irony with:

Beowulf, like Heorot, becomes simply a memory ... in the tragic vision even the most heroic form, perhaps most especially the heroic form is defeated by the elemental facts of existence in time ... we have been shown the impact of heroic energy on the world of the fallen dryht and have been shown also that in such a world it is heroic

energy that is destroyed, while the fallen creation continues in time ... the irony of the tragic vision decrees that life is not shaped according to human desires.<sup>29</sup>

Most ironically the heroic world requires conflict to sustain itself, and it is conflict that destroys it. Strife arises when peaceful, norm-governed relationships suffer a breach, often in the form of a homicide.

Thus one would expect *Beowulf* to revolve about the blood-feud. It could be regarded as the major unifying element in the poem. The feud is a principle of political relations in societies without extensive governmental institutions, whether internally or on an international scale. *Beowulf* is a tale of men and nations, and must necessarily focus upon their codes of behaviour, their morals, conventions and rituals. At the crisis point in all these processes, both in the heroic age and in the Anglo-Saxon period, stands the blood-feud.

As Dorothy Whitelock<sup>30</sup> notes, there is no period in Anglo-Saxon history where the interest in acts of vengeance would have been antiquarian. Any individual in the audience might at any time have found himself suddenly obliged to assume the role of an avenger. Nor did the ethics of Christianity supercede the blood-feud's rationale.

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29 Alvin A. Lee, *The Guest-Hall of Eden* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1972), p. 223.

30 Dorothy Whitelock, *The Audience of Beowulf*, p. 17.

The blood-feud in *Beowulf* receives consistent treatment: the futility of attempts at settlement are stressed, women are always present, if not at the centre of the action; the events are seen as more tragic than heroic or violent; and the symbolic aspects of weapons, blood and fire are stressed. During the feud instruments of battle achieve a state comparable with personification. Pictures of the flow of blood are more vivid than anywhere else and the flame is often the final vanquisher. Heorot goes up in flame, Hnaef is burnt and the poem ends with a mighty funeral pyre - the essence of the destructive pattern of the blood-feud and, in itself, a threat of ultimate vengeance upon the Geatish people.

On three levels then, the blood-feud dominates *Beowulf*:

1. the poet interprets the action of the main narrative thread in terms of feuding patterns
2. practically all the digressive material concerns itself with feuding, conflict and war
3. the allusive contributions to the atmosphere of the poem (e.g. Heorot's destruction, and the disintegration of the Geatish nation) are concerned with the feud.

The centrality of Hrothgar's 'sermon' within this structure is readily apparent. His sage eyes see arrogance as the greatest enemy of a man flawless in physical strength and all other attributes. This would be the greatest trial of all: that Beowulf should be able to recognize the transitory nature of his own

existence, his non-divinity. Practically and politically, it is reasonable that Hrothgar should warn a man he recognizes as a potential leader of the Geats against the dangers of pride, for pride is a factor elemental in the feuding process. It was affronted honour that demanded recourse to violence, yet honour is valid when free of egotistical pride. Thus the rein on pride was the key to peaceful international relations and the secret of a balanced rule, where rationality may prevail.

Hrothgar sees Beowulf's carriage in the light of his early glory as 'calm and discreet':

... *Eal þū hit gepyldum healdest,  
maegen mid mōdes snyttrum ...*

11. 1705-1706

and then points to a man, who forgets whence this power comes, and becomes complacent, neglecting his duty to his subjects and to his former renown. With great dramatic impact Hrothgar, *woroldcynīnga ðaem selestan*, suggests how close he had come to Heremod's state in his prosperity, until Grendel came. Complacency and pride are the two great dangers of rule; the former for the affluence which feeds it and invites onslaught, which the nation may not have health to withstand, and the latter for its quickness to take offence and over-eagerness for conflict.

Besides the control of *ofermod* that Hrothgar exhorts, is his advice on generosity. In this Hrothgar echoes the early authorial comment that:

*Swā sceal geong guma gōde gewyrcean,  
 fromum feohgiftum on faeder bearme,  
 þeat hine on ylde eft gewunigen  
 wilgesīþas, þonne wīg cume,  
 leode gelāesten; lofdāedum sceal  
 in mægþa gehwāere man geþeon.*

11. 20-25

The man who does not ensure internal allegiance and contentment within his realm is also neglecting in his duty, for he exposes his people to the dangers of anarchy - *him bebeorgan ne con.*

Further a man should be aware of his mortality.

Now all these three factors become significant in Beowulf's last action. The dragon fight is concerned with the concepts of pride, generosity and mortality, and superficially, we see Beowulf fail in each issue. He goes forth against the dragon alone in his old age, declaring:

*... Nis þæt ēower sīð,  
 ne gemet mannes, nefne min anes,  
 þæt hē wīð āglāecan eofodo dāele,  
 eorlscype efne.*

11. 2532-2535

Ironically his thanes 'forget their gifts' in his hour of need. At his death only chaos is foreseen, for he alone has been the stay of his people and he leaves them with no security to resist their enemies. Beowulf has 'forgotten' his mortality and has failed to ensure the continuation of his nation beyond his own life. Du Bois finds Beowulf totally culpable in Heremod's terms:

In short, his fault is originally similar to Hrothgar's, a result of overconfident pride and careless sloth leading to a debasement of the Geats.<sup>31</sup>

He cites Beowulf's sudden insecurity at line 2329:

*wēnde se wīsa,      þæt hē Wealdende  
ofer ealde riht      ēcean Dryhtne  
bitre gebulge;*

as an admission of guilt, whose cause 'the hero of the poem is naturally not very explicit at defining'.

Maurice Aldridge<sup>32</sup> has indicated to me that he believes that *lof-geornost* in the last line of the poem, should be read as 'vain-glorious'. It is possible to translate the final words on Beowulf:

*cwædon þæt hē wære      wyruldcyninga  
manna mildust      ond monðwærust,  
lēodum līðost      ond lofgeornost.*

11. 3180-3182

in at least two markedly different ways without distorting the basic meaning of any word<sup>33</sup>, yet suggesting very different views of the hero's character:

- (a) ... they said that he was, amongst worldly kings, the mildest and gentlest of men, kindest to his people and most eager for fame.
- (b) ... they said that he was, amongst worldly kings, the most generous and most prosperous of men, gracious to his people and most eager for fame.

While (a) implies a gentle, almost Christ-like king, (b) suggests

31 Arthur E. Du Bois, 'The Unity of *Beowulf*', p. 401.

32 Personal comment.

33 J.R. Clark Hall, *A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, 4th ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1960).

a true *commitatus* lord. The connotations of 'vainglorious' would be acceptable in (b).

Aldridge's view would perhaps endorse Du Bois' opinions and would be consistent with my ideas on the *Beowulf* poet's condemnation of heroic values in the poem. However, it is possible to accommodate this stance in a more moderate framework. Beowulf need not be seen as a Heremod to demonstrate the failure of the heroic ethos. Indeed, the futility of Beowulf's personal attempt to cope with his world becomes more poignant and more powerful if Beowulf is seen as the very best man that this kind of setting can produce, and even he is shown to fail.

I would prefer to read *lofgeornost* as 'very eager' or 'most eager for renown', without the connotations of 'overeager'. The poet's disapprobation of the heroic *mores* is always understated and never explicit. To condemn his hero overtly in the last word of the poem would be inconsistent with his style.

Further, Du Bois' interpretation requires that we see the poem as study of a man's rise and moral decay, which renders the work rather thin. We know too little of Beowulf for a tragedy through *hamartia* to have much meaning. Essentially we are not dealing with the progress of a man, but of ideas. Beowulf, like Hrothgar, is a great king, of which the poet frequently reminds us. He surpasses Hrothgar and rejects the Heremod mould. He 'actually trans-

cends by far this picture of an ideal king with the ultimate sacrifice of his own life in favour of his people'<sup>34</sup>.

The concern in *Beowulf* is less with the hero as a man than with Man in the heroic mould; less with why man acts against evil, than with the glory of the fact that he does act. It is important to the poem that the potency of evil is heavily emphasized and that the magnitude of acting is fully realized for the heroism to emerge. It is these two aspects that endow *Beowulf* with its 'epic proportion'.

Further it might be said that there *is* no true heroism without futility. Heroic victories are but pale shadows of heroic failures. Beowulf, in whom the poet embodies superlative man, thus achieves in his death no less than full heroism, complete with its illusion and its futility.

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34 Bonjour, *Digressions*, p. 52.

Chapter Seven

CONCLUSION

It now remains to be seen whether the examination of narrative technique brings the modern reader any closer to an understanding of the poem. By 'understanding' I mean a clear conception of the poem's main thematic concerns, and a comprehension of how all its constituents work together to form an entity.

Possibly the most contentious idea developed in this study is that of an ironic perspective existing on the values of the heroic ethos. This is detectable in the distancing technique which separates the narrative voice from the time and values of the subject-matter. The strong suggestion inherent in this, that the events, behaviour patterns and values of the narrative, do not reflect those of the intended audience, cannot be ignored. Scholes and Kellogg, who firmly assign *Beowulf* to the oral tradition, do not recognize the idea of irony in this kind of narrative:

The oral story teller 'mediates' ... between his story and his audience. Not only is there no author with whom to set up an ironic relationship but there can be no ironic relationship with the story itself. The oral tradition is both the story and the author.<sup>1</sup>

Very possibly this could be true of the basic plot elements in oral narrative, but it seems not wholly admissible in broad application. It would be possible surely to present a traditional tale with even the strength of irony found in the unreliable narrator. The tradition itself would ensure that the audience would detect any ironic distortions of a conventional tale. However, perhaps Scholes and Kellogg's comment would be better employed as an argument against

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<sup>1</sup> *The Nature of Narrative*, p. 55.

consigning *Beowulf* in its extant form to the oral tradition.

The perspective of time in the poem, and the deliberate separation of the narrator from the narrated present, allows for an analytic attitude towards the issues which the poem raises. *Beowulf* is more than a tale set in the heroic ethos; it is an examination of that ethos. It is ostensibly an elevation of heroic values, but in fact finds them ultimately wanting. A purely elevating narrative would need not the sad ending, nor the concern with mutability and death. Although the main narrative thread in *Beowulf* concerns the actions of a hero, it is no *Heldenleben*. As seen, the hero is insufficiently individualized and too little of his life is known for the poem to fit this mould. Moreover, although his heroic behaviour is overtly endorsed by the narrative voice, his actions are not seen as ultimate solutions or a full resolution of difficulties. Gloom descends on the heroic world at the close of the poem. Its methods of dealing with the problems of human existence are seen to be futile. Despite Beowulf's victory, he also fails.

The poet has placed a perspective on the ethos of the poem, which needs to be seen as an analysis of an era whose vestiges were still present in the England of his time. Christianity provided the most viable alternative to the principles of heroic behaviour. The *Beowulf* poet was obviously well acquainted with Christian mythology and yet never mentions Christ. As already seen, the mention of Christ in the narrated events of *Beowulf* would have been

a dramatic and thematic disaster. For the concept of mortality to have the kind of force it does in *Beowulf*, the idea of redemption cannot occur. However, there is more to it than this. The narrative voice emerges in the first person, saying that he has heard that ..., at points in the poem where gold, war, heroic valour and heroic life are directly commented upon. The speaker seems to be deliberately dissociating himself from evaluative statements upon these concerns. Implicitly, they are not part of his code of values. There is a profound understanding in the poem of the workings of the heroic code; and the poem finally becomes a statement of the frailties of that code. These frailties are embodied in the monsters.

Grendel is one of the brood of Cain, and as such is symbolic of irrational blood-lust. He is the murderer and the destroyer of what little harmony exists in the post-lapsarian world. His link with the feuding concerns of *Beowulf* is noted by Lee:

Early in the poem when Grendel is first named and connected with the archetypal fratricide, the reader is confronted with a pattern highly suggestive in its possibilities for adaptation to tales of blood-thirsty feuding in Germanic Society.<sup>2</sup>

Grendel's mother is, of course, also linked with the feud motif in *Beowulf*. Her only motive in attacking Heorot is revenge. Grendel's purely irrational, anti-societal motives set a pattern of behaviour in action, which can only be resolved by complete destruction of his 'society'. Grendel's physical likeness to human form lends a resonance to his embodiment of the Cain principle. He is the de-

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<sup>2</sup> Lee, *Guest-Hall of Eden*, p. 184.

structive individual in the heroic society: one who initiates a blood-letting which is ultimately self-destructive. As Kathryn Hume notes:

Not only does he kill freely, he even enjoys the act: his eyes light up (ll. 726-7), *his mōd āhlōg* (l. 730), *he lūst wigeð* (l. 599).<sup>3</sup>

As the poet goes to some lengths to demonstrate, this evil is deeply entrenched in heroic society and must erupt from time to time. It is potential in Ingeld and Unferth and it surfaces in the Finn lay. The evident blood-lust in the slaying of Ongentheow has elements of Grendel-like behaviour in it. This may be why the poet offers a rather weak justification of Hygelac's rewarding of the slayers afterwards. This is finally a negative comment on Hygelac, for he is thoroughly caught up in the heroic ethos. Beowulf shows that the rationale of the feud allows Hrethel no solace at the death of his son. Because death cannot be dealt for death in this case, the old man collapses.

The dragon is another embodiment of the irrationalities and dangers inherent in the heroic world. He is the armed warrior exacting a blood-thirsty justice for the theft of gold. The poet places considerable emphasis on the importance of treasure in the presented society. In order for a chieftain to deal out gifts repeatedly in the hall for good deeds which cement the society and work for its good, he must by some means acquire that treasure. The primary

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<sup>3</sup> Kathryn Hume, 'The Theme and Structure of *Beowulf*', *Studies in Philology*, LXXII (1975), p. 6.

means of doing this was assault on one's neighbours, which placed the lives and well-being of one's own society in jeopardy. This logical flaw in heroic society is thoroughly examined by the *Beowulf* poet, particularly in the latter section of the poem. In the earlier sections the 'digressions' help to throw emphasis on the central idea of the feud in the main narrative thread. During the dragon sequence the emphasis is upon gold and war. Hygelac's Frisian raid and Ravenswood are battles essentially motivated by gold-seeking. The strong connection of this motive with the feud pattern is seen in the messenger's long 'digression' anticipating revenge from Onela and the Frisians for the assaults upon them, once Beowulf is gone.

The dragon himself is an embodiment of this principle of war. He is motivated by a desire to possess gold. When his hoard is violated he emerges from his 'hall' wreathed in fire, with his strategy planned:

... *beorges getrowode*  
*wīges ond weallas ...*

11. 2322-2323

Just as the poet refers to Grendel's attacks as feuding, so he refers to the dragon's actions as warfare, *wyrmes wīg*. His attack affects the innocent in an irrational and unjustified manner, as any war does:

... *Gēata lēode*  
*hatode ond hīnde ...*

11. 2319-2320

Beowulf's own interest in the spoils of the battle after the dragon fight re-inforces this view. As he apparently sees it, he has acquired for his people, with the loss of only one life, a substantial treasure hoard which he consigns to Wiglaf's keeping. In terms of the logic of heroic society this should make for an increased stability in Geatish society, for their lord will be in a position to be very generous with his gifts. However, Wiglaf is aware of the fallacy, which Beowulf does not see. The gold has been bought at too high a cost and the nation can only suffer from it:

*nalles eorl wegan*  
*māððum tō gemyndum, nē maegð scýne*  
*habban on healse hringweðrounge,*  
*ac sceal geōmormōd, golde berēafod*  
*oft nalles āene elland tredan,*  
*nū se herewīsa hleahtor ālegde,*  
*gamen ond glēodrēam. Forðon sceall gār wesan*  
*monig morgenceald mundum bewundum*  
*haefen on handa, nalles hearpan swēg*  
*wīgend weccean, ac se wonna hrefn*  
*fūs ofer fāegum fela reordian,*  
*earne secgan, hū him at āete spēow,*  
*penden hē wīð wulf wael rēafode.'*

11. 3015-3027

The expected vengeance from the Swedes and Frisians will be even more heavily motivated by the knowledge of a great treasure hoard to be seized. Thus the doomed gold is destroyed.

In this manner the poet shows the flaws in heroic rationales towards a revelation of the glory and futility of a lost era. If there is didacticism to be found in *Beowulf*, enquiries should begin at this point. The evident Christianity of the poet, and

his interest in the non-Christian principles of the feud and warfare of avarice, must surely result in a condemnation, however subtle, of the heroic values. This would resolve the Christian/Pagan controversy which is familiar to all critics of *Beowulf*. Brodeur's comment that

... in placing Christian sentiments in the mouths of his more sympathetic characters (the poet) is, in effect, representing them as speaking, as he and his contemporaries thought of good men speaking.<sup>4</sup>

further resolves the issue. The fictional world of *Beowulf* is a pagan one, but the poet and his intended audience knew Christianity and would have been able to see quite readily the flaws in the *mores* which preceded their Christian ethos.

The views which have evolved in the course of this study of *Beowulf* differ rather markedly from those which give centrality to the deeds and characters in the narrative. The somewhat flat characterization of Beowulf examined here tends to militate against hero centrality. Beowulf depends too heavily on his epic heroic setting to emerge as a strongly individualized and fully-rounded character. Only two elements prevent him from being a totally formalized idea: the interior view of his state of mind before the dragon fight, and his love for Hygelac.

Brodeur sees the unity of *Beowulf* vested in Hygelac:

... it is only the main plot which suffers discontinuity; the action of the sub-plot is continuous, and is made, in all its parts, to pivot upon a single historic event ... the death of Hygelac.<sup>5</sup>

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4 Brodeur, *Art of Beowulf*, p. 242.

5 Brodeur, 'The Structure and Unity of *Beowulf*', p. 186.

The idea of Hygelac certainly is present whenever Beowulf is present in the narrative. Above all Beowulf sees himself as *Hygelaces þegn*. Hygelac's death is dealt with by the poet during a flashback to Beowulf's assumption of the throne (ll. 2350-2390), but this is the only time Hygelac enters the narrative without Beowulf. It seems dangerous then to give Hygelac as central a position as Brodeur does. Rather, he is Beowulf's lord and with Beowulf characterized as the ideal product of the heroic ethos, it is right that he should share an intimate trust with his lord.

Hygelac does fulfil the role of the *commitatus* prince in the same way as Hrothgar. Both maintain relatively stable and apparently glorious kingdoms. However, just as Hrothgar shows the stains of the heroic world, so does Hygelac. Hrothgar cannot act against Grendel; he harbours Unferth in his court; he cannot stave off the Heathobeardan feud. Although his 'sermon' shows his awareness of the flaws in heroic philosophy, he admits his own guilt of them himself. He pin-points the difficulties of rule in Germanic society:

*þinceð him tō lýtēl,      þæt hē lange hēold,  
gýtsað gromhýdig,      nallas on gylp seleð,  
faette beagas, ...*

11. 1748-1750

*... fēhð oþer tō,  
sē þe unmunlice      māðmas dāeleþ,  
eorles aergestrēon,      egesan ne gýmeð,*

11. 1755-1757

A king cannot afford to be generous or cautious. Too much gift-giving must result in the necessity of war, too little and the nation will disintegrate without the rallying point of a wealthy

lord. Loyalty needs to be bought in the heroic culture. Its concerns, rewards and tokens of love are all material.

It is an elevation of Hygelac that he has commanded the love and loyalty of so fine a prince as Beowulf. Nevertheless, it cannot be overlooked that this is also, at least partially, bought. Beowulf refers to his dutiful military service to Hygelac in material terms:

*'Ic him þā māðmas,      þē hē mē sealde,  
geald aet guðe,      swā mē gifede waes,  
lēohtan sweorde;      hē mē lond forgeaf,  
eard ēðelwyn.'*

11. 2490-2493

Hygelac's Frisian raid, apparently unprovoked, gains no treasures for the Geatish coffers and deprives them of a leader, at the cost of a considerable number of lives. It leaves Beowulf with a legacy of war, which only he can control.

Beowulf himself is however finally overcome by the same principles of feud and war-gold. The might of the dragon must be matched with might. His gold is more valuable to the nation than an aged king. Beowulf leaves a legacy of honour - perhaps the most futile of all heroic values in the face of certain destruction - but a glorious one.

Thus the unity of *Beowulf* cannot be said to exist on any lesser level than theme. Generically *Beowulf* fills no category which entirely describes it, and any classification applied to it is ultimately limiting. The finer workings of the poet's craft need to be observed for his intentions to become even partially apparent.

Because the mode of *Beowulf* is so different from the rest of the Old English corpus, caution needs to be applied in any generalization about the poem. Close observation of technical aspects can lend new insights. Recent Beowulfian criticism has tended to focus on relatively circumscribed aspects of the poem, and this is a valuable and necessary means through which to reach a better understanding of its central issues. It is a taxing exercise to define what *Beowulf* is about and to show how all its elements form an entity. It is only through the assistance of a wide variety of approaches that any critic can venture upon a final statement. The essence of discovery still exists very strongly in any examination of the poem.

The artistic consciousness of the poet is most evident on a basic technical level in his use of the dramatic audience, metonymic visualization, evocation of setting and characterization. These all function to reveal the more profound levels of the poem; its structure and thematic concerns. Above all, the self-consciousness of the poet is seen in his manipulation of the entire construct to reveal his vision of its substance. He never allows an overt judgement to emerge, but rather permits the values and events in the poem to find their own closure. The intrusions of the narrative voice, which serve chiefly to separate the internal world of the poem from the world of the poet and his audience, provide only implied judgement.

The primary concern of the poem is how a man should behave in the fallen world. The examination of the issue is placed in an

heroic setting and given life by an ideal individual found within it. Beowulf is the paragon of his society, but is necessarily caught in its system of values and bound by his own mutability and mortality. Thus both the ideal of the heroic ethos and the consummate individual it produces, are shown to be unable to control the forces of evil inherent in man and in the world. As Grendel and the dragon symbolize the flaws in the heroic cosmos, so do the individuals in the poem exemplify man in his struggle to achieve a Utopia, or what Lee designates 'the guest-hall of Eden'.

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