BEOWULF: THE CONCEPT OF THE HERO

BY

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SCOPE AND CONTENTS:

This thesis deals with the Old English poem Beowulf. Through a detailed study of it and of other literature of a heroic and tragic nature, it explores the character, attributes, and achievements of a hero of this kind of fiction and draws some conclusions about the significance which may be found in the hero's nature and accomplishments. In the process, other literary works, not necessarily epic or Anglo-Saxon, are referred to, enabling the hero to be studied from a number of illuminating angles. Each of the first three chapters puts Beowulf in a particular context; the last two chapters combine the different threads of development and present a conclusion.

I wish to acknowledge my thanks to Professor [illegible]. Lee for his instruction and guidance over a period of nearly three years, and for his assistance during the period when this thesis was being written.

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I

THE HERO AS INDIVIDUAL

Beowulf gives us an imaginative presentation of a hero in action. This statement has several implications which can be more clearly perceived when they are isolated. In the first place, it means that the poet, like the scops and audiences who took part in shaping the poem during its days of oral transmission, is primarily concerned with telling a good story, not with writing a Christian allegory or depicting the society of the Baltic people during the period of the Germanic migrations. In Northrop Frye's [redacted] terminology, "the poet's attention is centripetally directed. It is directed towards putting words together, not towards aligning words with meanings."[1] In the second place, the word "imaginative" indicates that the poet was not striving for historical accuracy. He is working in the romance mode,[2] basically, and is concerned about accuracy only as far as the framework and demands of that

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[1] Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 86.

[2] "If superior in degree to other men and to his environment, the hero is the typical hero of romance, whose actions are marvellous but who is himself identified as a human being. The hero of romance moves in a world in which the ordinary laws of nature are slightly suspended: prodigies of courage and endurance, unnatural to us, are natural to

particular mode are involved. And thirdly, his attention is focused on the hero. This focus is certainly not confined to this particular mode or genre of literature, and it becomes possible to compare Beowulf, as the protagonist of a poem which is most clearly related to epic forms of literature, with the protagonists of other epic poems.

The present study will be concerned with the character and nature of Beowulf: how the poet visualized him and what can be found out about him by comparing him with other heroes. But first of all, a few points must be made about heroic poetry in general.

Mircea Eliade has made the following comments:

> The recollection of a historical event or a real personage survives in popular memory for two or three centuries at the utmost. This is because popular memory finds difficulty in retaining individual events and real figures. The structures by means of which it functions are different categories instead of events, archetypes instead of historical personages. The historical personage is assimilated to his mythical model (hero, etc.), while the event is identified with the category of mythical actions (fight with a monster, enemy brothers, etc.). If certain epic poems preserve what is called "historical truth", this truth almost never has to do with definite persons and events, but with institutions, customs, landscapes. . . . The memory of historical events is modified, after two or three centuries, in such a way that it can enter into the

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him, and enchanted weapons, talking animals, terrifying ogres and witches, and talismans of miraculous power violate no rule of probability once the postulates of romance have been established. Here we have moved from myth, properly so called, into legend, folk tale, <u>märchen</u>, and their literary affiliates and derivatives." Frye, <u>op. cit.</u>, p. 33.

mold of the archaic mentality, which cannot accept what is individual and preserves only what is exemplary.[3]

In quoting this passage I do not mean to imply that I think Beowulf was a historical personage, but it helps to lay a foundation for a brief discussion of the nature of heroic poetry.

If Professor Eliade is right, then we need not look to Beowulf for a realistic portrayal of a Scandinavian nobleman living around 500 A. D. Beowulf has been formed by two different, though not entirely distinct, forces. In the first place, for a period of close to two hundred years--the space of time between the year 535, when the last of such events as form the factual element is likely to have taken place,[4] and the first half of the eighth century, which is the time commonly agreed upon for the composition of Beowulf as we have it[5]--at least some of the matter of the poem was circulating in, probably, oral form. The poem itself gives us a few tantalizing hints concerning the origin and circulation of poetic matter of this sort. On the morning after Beowulf's victory over Grendel, the court scop or minstrel is called upon to recite a lay praising the hero's exploit. In other words, he had to compose it while

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[3] Mircea Eliade, Cosmos and History (New York: Harper, 1959), pp. 43-44.

[4] Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg, ed. Fr. Klaeber (3rd ed. with 1st and 2nd supplements; Boston: D. C. Heath and Company, 1950), p. cviii.

[5] Ibid., p. cxiii.

he sang. But it must be remembered that he himself had not witnessed the battle, and therefore in all likelihood his eulogistic composition was already of a somewhat general and stereotyped nature, drawing on his "wordhoard" of traditional fictional heroes and their exploits.

Another hint comes from the fact that by the time Beowulf arrives at Heorot, Hrothgar already knows something about him: his ancestry, the knowledge of which is to be attributed to his former acquaintance with Beowulf's father Ecgtheow, and the fact that he is credited with being supernaturally strong. He says that the latter information was brought back to Heorot by envoys whom he had sent to the court of the Geats with gifts (377a-381a).[6] It is probable that this information was embodied in lays about Beowulf's prowess which already existed among the Geats and which were repeated by the envoys in Hrothgar's presence. These envoys would have been graciously entertained by the Geats, and as we know not only from Beowulf but also from The Iliad, The Odyssey, The Nibelungenlied, and other heroic literature, the singing or reciting of adventure stories was standard entertainment at all feasts and social gatherings.

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[6] Locations of passages in the poem as given in parentheses immediately following the reference or quotation refer to the Klaeber edition already cited. Translations of passages quoted are my own, using Klaeber's Glossary and referring for corroboration to the translation of J. R. Clark Hall of Beowulf and the Finnesburg Fragment, rev. by C. L. Wrenn, pref. by J. . . Tolkien (new edition; London: Allen and Unwin, 1950).

During this period of oral circulation, the matter of the poem was formed in ways peculiar to oral poetry. Olrik has emphasized the standardization of character and incident; critics of the "oral-formulaic" persuasion, such as F. P. Magoun, Jr., stress the standardization of language to the point where they claim that we could prove, if we had access to all the oral literature which ever existed in a particular language, that this literature consisted entirely of formulas which would be repeated from one poem to another:

> Whereas a lettered poet of any time or place, composing (as he does and must) with the aid of writing materials and with deliberation, creates his own language as he proceeds, the unlettered singer, ordinarily composing rapidly and extempore before a live audience, must and does call upon a ready-made language, upon a vast reservoir of formulas filling just measures of verse.[7]

Whether or not the two poetic processes to which Magoun refers are as distinct as he seems to think is open to discussion. Northrop Frye presents an opposing view:

> The new poem . . . is born into an already existing order of words, and is typical of the structure of poetry to which it is attached. . . . Poetry can only be made out of other poems; novels out of other novels. Literature shapes itself, and is not shaped externally: the forms of literature can no more exist outside literature than the forms of sonata and fugue and rondo can exist outside music.[8]

In a view such as this one we can see the meeting place of the functions which Magoun has isolated. The availability

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[7] Francis P. Magoun, Jr., "The Oral-Formulaic Character of Anglo-Saxon Narrative Poetry", in Lewis E. Nicholson, ed., An Anthology of "Beowulf" Criticism (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1963), p. 189.

[8] Frye, op. cit., p. 97.

of writing materials makes little difference: whether the poet is composing orally or on paper, he is drawing on a tradition already ancient, an order of words ready to his hand, just as he works within a framework of ideas and literary patterns which are familiar to him and to his audience. Eliade's discussion of the standardization of events and characters in heroic poetry supports this.

In Beowulf, then, we have a poem in which the imitation of oral techniques is evident: the poet must have been thoroughly familiar with the way in which the scops worked. It involves standardization of language and repetition of convenient phrases. In the same way it is evidently the result of a process of standardization of characters and incidents as described by Eliade. He shaped his material into a form which represented his own vision of the story's structure and significance; the functions of creator and chronicler fused, and what was already generalised in the poet's sources as a result of oral circulation mixed with the elements which the poet generalized to suit his purposes.

The foregoing digression was, I felt, necessary before going on to study what I have referred to as the character and the nature of Beowulf. This distinction possibly needs elaboration. Beowulf, the protagonist of our poem, can be said to have a "character" in only a very limited sense. Our conception of the "character" of a

person depicted in a work of fiction is based on the type of fiction that makes some attempt at being true to life as the author sees it, so that the character of a person in a book can be studied in a way resembling the study of a living person, making allowance for certain fictionalizing forces. In heroic literature, under which I include most of the works which are strictly or more loosely termed "epic", as well as a good deal of mythology and legend that defies classification under a specific genre, there is little attempt at realism, and therefore it becomes difficult to talk about the "character" of someone like Beowulf or Sifrid or Gilgamesh without evoking in the reader's mind a vision of character as it can be studied in more realistic fiction. The study of character in heroic literature must concern itself with very general traits, with the qualities that relate Beowulf and Sifrid to each other and to many more heroic protagonists rather than the qualities which make them humanly recognizable, familiar, and individual. In most cases, therefore, I will be using the term "nature" to refer to the qualities and attributes of the less realistic literary figures I shall discuss, and reserve the term "character" mainly for use as a convenient synonym for "literary figure", where the alteration in meaning, though still discernible, is slight and unobtrusive.

One of the most important facts about Beowulf is that basically he is a man alone, a situation which is considered

evil or tragic in a society where tribal solidarity and communal joys are highly valued. Men are not alone by choice but by compulsion: the speaker and chief character in the Anglo-Saxon poem "The Wanderer" is alone because his lord has died and as a result the dryht to which he belonged has broken up. The reasons for the aloneness of the thief in Beowulf (2214b-2226a) are not made clear, but he seems to steal the dragon's goblet because he has to pay compensation to his lord, perhaps in order to be restored to the dryht after expulsion for some misdeed or other.

Beowulf is alone for none of these reasons. He is, in fact, very much within the tribal structure, and defends it against attacks from outside. But he is different from his companions, and this difference lies in his very nature. In the first place, he is supernaturally strong: the author's first reference to him introduces this motif and we are never allowed to forget it. He is first described as:

> gōd mid Gēatum, ...
> sē wæs moncynnes mægenes strengest
> on þǣm dæge þysses līfes,
> æþele ond ēacen.
>
> (195 -198a)
>
> [Excellent among the Geats . . . he was
> the greatest in strength of mankind in the
> days of this life, noble and mighty.]

Hrothgar gives more specific information about Beowulf's strength:

> Donne sægdon þæt sǣlīþende,
> . . . . . .
> . . . . . þæt hē þrītiges
> manna mægencræft on his mundgripe
> heaþorōf hæbbe.
>
> (377 -381a)

[Then sea-voyagers said . . . that he, the war-famed, had the strength of thirty men in the grip of his hand.]

As well as being renowned for strength, Beowulf is noble of mind: truly "gentle" in the medieval sense of the word. One of the first epithets which the poet uses to describe him is hiserȝf (204a), which combines the ideas of strong-mindedness and bravery of soul with the renown that follows upon the possession of these qualities. The poet keeps this virtue foremost in the reader's mind throughout the poem with many different words and images. The one which occurs most frequently [9] is se gōda, literally 'the good', which acquires almost the force of the phrase "The True" as Virgil applies it to Aeneas.

Beowulf's spirit is shown in the reasons he gives for going to the assistance of Hrothgar. He has heard that the Danish ruler is short of men (201b) and therefore he, with the generosity and the high spirits of youth, goes to help him. The coast guard is impressed by Beowulf's appearance:

> Næfre ic māran geseah
> eorla ofer eorþan, ðonne is ōwer sum,
> secg on searwum; nis þæt seldguma,
> wæpnum geweorþad, næfne him his wlite lēoge,
> ānlīc ansȳn.
>
> (247b-251a)

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[9] The phrase, with variations only in case, appears ten times: at ll. 205a, 384b, 675a, 758a, 1190b, 1518a, 1595a, 2327b, 3036a, 3114a.

[Never have I seen a greater nobleman on the earth, a warrior in his armour, than is one of you; that is no retainer rewarded with weapons, unless his appearance, his peerless form, belies him.]

Around him, as around Scyld who is also a heroic figure in the poem, hangs an aura of exploit and adventure. The objects associated with this are armour and weapons, ships and the sea, and treasure, with its connotations of ring-giving ceremonies in the great banquet halls. Scyld, for instance, comes from the sea in a ship and returns to it in the same way. The motifs of treasure, ring-giving, and armour are all strongly present in the description of his funeral ship. All these lines of imagery dominate the passage dealing with Beowulf's decision to go to Hrothgar's assistance, the building of the ship, the voyage, and the arrival in Denmark. With the sound of the clinking armour comes the brilliance of the light which it reflects, so that the picture sparkles with brightness and cheerful noise:

Gūðbyrne scān
heard hondlocen, hringīren scīr
song in searwum, þā hīe tō sele furðum
in hyra gryregeatwum gangan cwōmon.
(321b-324)

[Their war-corslets shone, hard and hand-woven, the bright ring-iron clanked in their gear when they came to the hall for the first time in their terrific armour.]

The brightness of the armour rivals that of Heorot; it is used as synechdoche for the warriors themselves (333), and it is among the gifts with which faithful retainers are rewarded. Because of all these associations, the armour becomes the bright opposite to the monsters' darkness;

because it is the product of human craftsmanship it opposes the unimproved, in fact debased, nature of the monsters.

The attributes of Beowulf discussed so far, taken by themselves, would not be enough to account for the difference in nature between Beowulf and the other characters in the poem. In physical strength, mobility, and astuteness he is of the same nature but of greater stature than his fellows. There are other characteristics which make him him different in nature as well.

What sets him apart most drastically is his function as fighter of monsters. With the exception of Sigemund and Wiglaf,[10] to both of whom I will return shortly, Beowulf is the only character in the poem who fights against non-human opponents, and he fights them singlehanded.

He states his qualifications as a monster-queller in his first conversation with Hrothgar. The old king is already familiar with Beowulf's lineage and has heard from envoys between the Danish and Geatish courts of Beowulf's superhuman strength. Now Beowulf, after relating how he came to undertake the journey to Heorot, tells about some of his earlier exploits:

ic of searwum cwōm,
fāh from fēondum, þǣr ic fīfe geband,
ȳðde eotena cyn, ond on ȳðum slōg

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[10] Breca is a very minor exception. He protects himself against whales (539b-541a) but this is very vague. Only his swimming ability sets him apart, but for my purposes this is not a significant parallel.

niceras nihtes, ...
. . . . . .
forgrand gramum; ond nū wiþ Grendel sceal,
wiþ þām āglǣcan ǣna gehēgan
ðing wiþ þyrse.
(419b-426a)

[I came from the battle, blood-stained from the enemy, where I bound five, destroyed the clan of giants, and on the waves slew sea-monsters by night . . . . I crushed the fierce foes; and now with Grendel, the monster, I will hold council alone.]

This passage is important for three things which it tells us about Beowulf. His past achievements of giant-slaying prepare us for the combat with Grendel, and his victory over water monsters indicates his proficiency in underwater combats. Finally, he himself demands the right to fight single-handed. A few lines later (433a-440a) he announces his intention to fight without weapons, thereby meeting Grendel on the monster's terms. But it is worth noting that this is the way Beowulf seems to prefer fighting all his opponents, if possible. Before meeting the dragon he tells his followers:

Nolde ic sweord beran,
wǣpen tō wyrme, gif ic wiste hū
wiþ ðām āglǣcan elles meahte
gylpe wiðgrīpan, swā ic giō wiþ Grendle dyde.
(2518b-2521)

[Nor would I bear a sword, a weapon against the dragon, if I knew how else to fulfil my boast, grapple with the dragon as I did formerly with Grendel.]

In the one combat with another human being in which we hear of Beowulf being engaged, that with Dæghrefn, the champion of the Hugas, he kills his opponent not with weapons but

with his own strength, crushing the life out of him (2501a-2508a).

In Beowulf's underwater contests, however, weapons and armour are more important. Mail corslets and naked swords are put to good use by both him and Breca in their swimming adventure, the first to save their lives and the second to despatch sea monsters. In preparation for the fight with Grendel's mother he arms himself completely and borrows Hrunting, a battle-tested sword, from Unferth. As is the case with the dragon fight, the use of arms in these combats can be attributed to the odds against which Beowulf fights. It is not merely the non-human strength of the monsters concerned which constitutes these odds. Later on in this chapter I will be discussing the water and the wasteland as parts of unformed and uncreated chaos, and their inhabitants as the embodiments of this, primordial foes of being. To oppose them, Beowulf makes use of the products of human creativity. The distinction is made more clear when we remember that Grendel fights Beowulf in a human habitation, and is therefore unaided by the atmosphere of chaos and wilderness which is his natural habitat.

A hero is in part characterised by his opponents, and the monsters deserve some attention. I do not intend to go over all the interpretations offered by eminent critics, but there are a few points which have not been as thoroughly discussed as they deserve to be.

The first reference to and description of Grendel is incorporated into the passage which describes the building of Heorot and the joy of the people when it is completed and habitable. Through many military victories Hrothgar's domain has been enlarged, very much like the enlargement which it underwent during Scyld's reign described earlier in the poem. As a sort of monument to these triumphs, it seems, Hrothgar decides to build a magnificent hall to accomodate the band of retainers which he has gathered around him. In due time the building is completed, healerna mæst 'greatest of houses' (78a), and it is named Heorot.

It is characteristic of the way the poet thinks, a method relying to a great extent on antitheses, that the completion of the hall immediately calls forth thoughts of its destined destruction by fire as a result of sword-hatred between close relatives. Not only that, but the mention of the hostility to come provokes a reference to and a brief description of Grendel, who in the near future will disrupt the carefree and joyful existence of the inhabitants of the new dwelling. [11]

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[11] Professor Bernard F. Huppe suggests that Grendel and the dragon are portentous in their appearance, foreshadowing the discord and disintegration which are to come in the near future. [Doctrine and Poetry: Augustine's Influence on Old English Poetry (New York: State University of New York, 1959), pp. 232-233.] This may very well be one element in the complex significance of the monsters, but it would be an extremely delicate task to ascertain in what proportions the ingredients of portent, symptom, and cause combine in them as the poet has conceived them.

Đā se ellengæst earfoðlīce
þrāge geþolode, sē þe in þȳstrum bād,
þæt hē dōgora gehwām drēam gehȳrde
hlūdne in healle.

(86 -89a)

[When the cold demon, he who dwelt in darkness, endured with difficulty for a time that daily he heard merriment loud in the hall.]

This leads directly to the song of the creation of the world with which the court scop entertains the guests at what might be considered the "house-warming" celebration.

Swā ðā driht(g)uman drēamum lifdon,
ēadiglīce, oð ðæt ān ongan
fyrene fre(a)man fēond on helle;
wæs se grimma gæst Grendel hāten,
mære mearcstapa, sē þe mōras hēold,
fen ond fæsten; fīfelcynnes eard
wonsælig wer weardode hwīle,
siþðan him Scyppend forscrifen hæfde
in Cāines cynne.

(99 -107a)

[So the retainers lived blessedly, in delight, until one, a fiend from hell, began to perpetrate crimes; the grim demon was called Grendel, a great march-stalker who held the moors, fens and wilderness; that unblessed man inhabited for a while the hangout of the race of monsters, after the creator had condemned him with the kin of Cain.]

The sequence of ideas in the sixty-odd lines which I have just paraphrased and quoted from is important. It is evident that the poet does in fact think of beginnings and endings in close relation, and that antitheses such as happiness and its destruction, blessing and condemnation, form an important pattern in the poem. The building of Heorot is associated with the creation of the world and the Garden of Eden just as Grendel's lineage is traced back to

Cain, with inevitable associations of Satan and the fallen angels. The hall as Beowulf and his followers first see it is described in these terms:

> Guman ōnetton,
> sigon mtsomne, oþ þæt hỹ [s]æl timbred
> geatolíc ond goldfāh ongyton mihton;
> þæt wæs foremǣrost foldbūendum
> receda under roderum, on þǣm se rīca bād;
> līxte se lēoma ofer landa fela.
> (306b-311)

> [The men hurried, marching together, until they could see the timbered hall, splendid and gold-adorned; that was to earthdwellers the foremost of buildings under heaven--in it the ruler dwelt--its light shone over many lands.]

The connection of Grendel with the race of Cain is made evident in a passage already quoted (99 -107a).

The importance attached to an act of creating human habitation is, however, not confined to Christian mythology. Mircea Eliade has shown that from the most primitive times, rituals existed to make an uninhabited area of land habitable for man, and that these rituals imitated the creation of the world as it was believed to have happened and using the imagery and ritual procedure of each tribal religion. "Settlement in a new, unknown, uncultivated country is equivalent to an act of Creation." [12]

Furthermore, there is a distinction between space which has been "created" and other space.

> There is . . . a sacred space, and hence a strong, significant space; there are other spaces that are not sacred and

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[12] Mircea Eliade, Cosmos and History, p. 10.

so are without structure or consistency, amorphous. . . . For religious man, this spatial nonhomogeneity finds expression in the experience of an opposition between space that is sacred--the only real and really existing space--and all other space, the formless expanse surrounding it.[13]

The relevance of this to a study of the difference between Heorot and the demon-haunted mere should be evident. Heorot, itself a monument to Hrothgar's victories over enemy tribes, also represents a victory over chaos, and the building of it repeats the paradigmatic creation of the world, which established order in the midst of cosmic chaos.

Professor Eliade's comments also bring the monsters into significant focus:

> Since 'our world' is a cosmos, any attack from without threatens to turn it into chaos. And as 'our world' was founded by imitating the paradigmatic work of the gods, the cosmogony, so the enemies who attack it are assimilated to the enemies of the gods, the demons, and especially the archdemon, the primordial dragon conquered by the gods at the beginning of time. An attack on 'our world' is equivalent to an act of revenge by the mythical dragon, who rebels against the work of the gods, the cosmos, and struggles to annihilate it. 'Our' enemies belong to the powers of chaos. Any destruction of a city is equivalent to a retrogression into chaos. Any victory over the attackers reiterates the paradigmatic victory of the gods over the dragon (that is, over chaos).[14]

It is easy to see how the images of darkness, wastelands, and the wanderings of the exile which the poet uses with reference to Grendel agree with this description of the forces of chaos attacking organized human existence. Indeed,

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[13] Mircea Eliade, The Sacred and the Profane (New York: Harper, 1959), p. 20.

[14] Ibid., pp. 47-48 (italics Eliade's).

although Iliade speaks of the "mythical dragon", the description fits Grendel much better than it fits the dragon of Part Two of Beowulf.

This discussion of the significance of the Grendel clan in Beowulf is by no means intended to replace other interpretations, but rather to supplement them. For instance, it can be seen to lend an added dimension and valuable support to J. R. R. Tolkien's well-known statement:

> Man alien in a hostile world, engaged in a struggle which he cannot win while the world lasts, is assured that his foes are also the foes of Aryhten, that his courage, noble in itself is also the highest loyalty: so said thyle and clerk. [15]

Like it, my discussion broaches a subject which will become more important as this study progresses: an attempt at throwing some light on the Christian-pagan controversy by showing that the two elements can for the most part be reconciled because the poet uses images and ideas common to both rather than characteristic of one or the other set of beliefs.

The dragon in Beowulf is in many ways different from the Grendel monsters. The latter can be seen primarily in two contexts: in Christian terms as the opponents of God and man [16], assimilated to the giants and monsters who were

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[15] J. R. R. Tolkien, "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics", in Nicholson, op. cit., p. 78.

[16] We must remember that the same alignment of forces occurs in pre-Christian northern mythology--"the gods and men ranged in battle against the giants." C. S. Lewis, A Preface to "Paradise Lost" (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 32.

dragon's treasure-hoarding nature calls forth moralistic comments on the poet's part concerning the evil of hoarding, but this again is evil seen in a social context. Because of this, a more detailed discussion of the dragon fight will be left to a later chapter.

It can be argued that the defeat of the dragon is as much Wiglaf's doing as Beowulf's. But the aloneness of Beowulf is emphasized in this section by the fact that he has no son of his own who will inherit the kingdom and his personal possessions. He adopts Wiglaf as heir, and this circumstance, combined with the fact that Wiglaf's assistance in defeating the dragon (which he himself says is an achievement beyond his strength as a still unexperienced warrior) gives Wiglaf a shadow of the same "romantic" nature as Beowulf. Also, during the actual fighting, the two men become in a way one fighter. Wiglaf's shield is burned to ashes by the dragon's fire, so he seeks refuge under Beowulf's iron one. Beowulf's sword fails him so he uses a dagger for the decisive stroke, which assists Wiglaf's great cutting blow in finishing the dragon off. When one tries to visualize the scene, one sees a single shield for protection, and a single sword for striking, one fighter past his prime and one not yet at his full strength. The two men seem, then, to complement each other as Beowulf's supremacy gives way to Wiglaf's. I do not intend to press this idea further; I am primarily interested in the image of <u>one fighter</u> which

emerges during that last battle. From this point of view, the survival of Wiglaf can be seen as adding to the sense of triumph at the end, even though Beowulf himself dies.[19] This point becomes clearer if one tries to imagine the scene without Wiglaf--Beowulf and the dragon both dead, and no one but the ten cowards to officiate.

A final comment can be made here on the subject of Beowulf's difference from other characters in the poem. The locations in which he fights add force to this distinction, and the odds he faces are increased and complicated by them. The Grendel battle takes place in darkness, the one against Grendel's mother in a parody of the heroes' mead-hall, which is reached through water; the fight with the dragon occurs in the waste land which the dragon inhabits, near the barrow containing the cursed gold. To a modern mind there is nothing very terrible about any of these locations and conditions, but the scops and audiences who formed Beowulf did not have modern minds. In all likelihood, the primitive mentality which Mircea Eliade studies is very like that of these early Scandinavian people. As a result, the conditions under which Beowulf fought would be, to them, not simply difficult ones which hampered the hero physically, but actual manifestations

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[19] I have in mind here the group of ideas best represented by such comments as Tolkien's concerning "the worth of defeated valour" and "the value of doomed resistance" in "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics" in Nicholson, op. cit., p. 73. These ideas will be treated in more detail in a later chapter.

of evil and destructive forces in the universe, diffusions of the same sort of thing which the monsters personified. The epithets of darkness and chaos which are used to describe Grendel associate him with an evil force that is not merely physical but spiritual as well, in any body of beliefs.

This means that the earliest audiences of Beowulf would expect the hero to have, as well as extraordinary physical strength, a kind of spiritual courage that would be able to meet non-physical odds, the terrors of darkness, and the evil of uncreated chaos.

An incidental reflection of this can be found in the poet's use of the word wundor. It is used directly or indirectly of each of Beowulf's opponents: first of Grendel's arm which the people come to see (920a); then of the wyrm which is hauled up on the bank of the mere just before Beowulf's battle with Grendel's mother (1440a), which I think can be taken as referring to water monsters in general and, because of its location, as having a special relation to Grendel's mother; and lastly of the dragon, when the Geats, after hearing the bad news from the messenger, go to see the wundor (3032b), which can be taken as referring to the dead dragon or, possibly, to the whole battlefield. The term is also used three times to refer to the treasure in the dragon's barrow (2759a, 2768b, 3103a) and twice in connection with general speculations concerning the death of Beowulf and the decrees of fate with reference to men's lives (3037b, 3062b).

The use of wundor to refer to the monsters adds to the impression one gets of the strangeness of the hero's opponents. Whether or not the Migration-Age Scandinavians (or for that matter their eighth-century English descendants) believed in the existence of dragons or of ogres like Grendel, certainly they were strange and "wonderful" in the true sense of the word, and the poet's use of the term wundor draws attention to this.

Besides Beowulf and Wiglaf, there is another monster-queller in the poem, and that is Sigemund. The passage dealing with him is important and interesting for various reasons.

Klaeber, in his notes to lines 875 to 900 of the poem, where the adventures of Sigemund are briefly related, comments that "Sigemund's dragon fight is peculiar to the Beowulf."[20] That is, no other extant literature attributes the slaying of a dragon to Sigemund. It is tempting to follow Boebel in believing that it is the dragon fight of Sifrid which has here been transferred to Sigemund, his father.[21] But Klaeber dismisses this hypothesis:

> It is, on the whole, probable that in his allusions to Sigemund . . . he [the poet] followed good old Danish tradition, and that at that time no connection had yet been established between the Sigemund (Wælsing) legends and those of Sigfrit and of the Burgundians.[22]

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[20] Klaeber, Beowulf, p. 160.

[21] Ibid., p. 160 n.

[22] Ibid., pp. 160-161.

This is a point which is not likely to be settled, and for our purposes it is not important whether Sigemund actually was a dragon-slayer in his own right or not. The poet, in the exuberant passage following Beowulf's defeat of Grendel, compares the hero to Sigemund, who was at that time apparently a well known monster-queller.

One of the interesting points to be noted about the Sigemund reference is that it gives modern readers an idea of the way in which a poem like Beowulf is actually meant to function. Scholars lament the loss of stories and lays which would expand the brief and often tantalizingly obscure references which the Beowulf poet makes to Finn, Hrothulf, Ingeld, Offa, Ongentheow, and other personages and their adventures, and painstaking reconstructions are made of these stories.[23] These reconstructions are essential for an understanding of the poem, but they are academic in the sense that they do not suggest themselves spontaneously to the modern reader of the poem. The stories of Sigemund and Sifrid, however, are likely to be familiar to most readers of Beowulf, since we have The Volsunga Saga, The Nibelungenlied, and The Prose Edda easily available, as well as modern versions of the same cycle of stories in the operas of Wagner, the poetry of William Morris, and such related works as Ibsen's play

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[23] Examples are the ones about Finn by R. W. Chambers in "Beowulf": An Introduction (3rd. ed.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), pp. 245-269, and those about Ingeld, Freawaru, Hegtheow and others by Kemp Malone in Studies in Heroic Legend and in Current Speech (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1959).

The Vikings at Helgeland.[24] This means that when the modern reader of Beowulf comes across the reference to Sigemund, the details and ramifications of the story are brought to his mind to fill out the poet's meagre allusions.

The reference to Sigemund serves to remind us, if nothing else does, that the hero of The Nibelungenlied was also a monster-slayer. He is, of course, called Sifrid,[25] but this need not detain us. What is of primary interest is that he, like Beowulf, seems to be different in nature, different in kind, from the other characters of the poem. Sifrid finds himself in a society strongly influenced by the later medieval chivalric ideas which at the time of the writing of the poem[26] pervaded most European literature. This atmosphere makes Sifrid look all the more out of place. The only elements of the supernatural and the fantastic in the poem are associated with Sifrid, Brünnhilde, and the Nibelung treasure. The description of how Sifrid won the treasure includes references to twelve giants which the hero killed and to the dwarf, Alberich, who is the guardian of the treasure. From the dwarf Sifrid won the magic cloak which gives its wearer insuperable strength and renders him

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[24] For this last item I am indebted to J. W. Cutman's Introduction to William Morris' translation of The Volsunga Saga (New York: Collier Books, 1962), p. 55.

[25] This is the spelling used in Mowatt's translation of the poem, from which I will be quoting. I use it for that reason, although it is less familiar than some other spellings.

[26] "The turn of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries". The Nibelungenlied, trans. J. K. Mowatt (London: Dent, 1962), p. vi.

invisible as well. Hagen of Tronege, who is relating all this to the Burgundian court, continues:

> No knight ever had such great strength. And that's not all I know about him. This hero's hand slew a dragon. He bathed in its blood, and it made his skin horny, so that no weapon can cut it. This has been proved many times.[27]

He would seem, then, to be a remnant from an older group of legends or an earlier version of the story--a fairy-tale hero in a society where the codes and beliefs and way of life are those of chivalry and feudalism. Brunnhilde, with her supernatural strength and the most unchivalric tests she sets her suitors, also belongs in the world of fairy tale and romance.

C. W. Jones writes of The Nibelungenlied:

> The two distinguishing qualities of this epic are its panoramic view of history and its depiction of human choice. . . . The reader is caught up in the sweep of history, delineated in legendary form, from the misty, almost magical, and certainly pre-historic past, represented by episodes in the life of Siegfried and by Brunhild, through the economy of petty monarchs like Sieglind and Siegmund, to the fixed agrarian-military economy of the Burgundian court, and its dissolution under the impact of the totalitarianism represented by Etzel or Attila.[28]

We are not concerned with such a panorama of history in Beowulf, mainly because of the earlier date of its composition. But I believe it is possible and important to distinguish two main levels in the poem. Critics have long referred to them as the "fabulous" and the "historical"

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[27] The Nibelungenlied, p. 10 (vv. 99-100).

[28] Charles W. Jones, ed., Medieval Literature in Translation (New York: Longmans, Green, 1955), p. 435.

elements; the former include the monster-quelling activities of Beowulf and any other matter which does not have at least the semblance of historical veracity; by the latter is meant the material which, like the works of Daniel Defoe, has the appearance of historical fact, whether or not it can be proved. Because this material is often couched in highly elliptical terms, as if the hearer or reader will know at once what the poet is talking about, it caused the critics of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries an inordinate amount of trouble and engrossed all their attention.

W. P. Ker saw the value of the poem, not only as a historical document but also as poetry, as lying in this historical material. The fact that he considered its poetic value makes him one of the wisest and, to modern minds, most congenial spokesmen for his generation of Beowulf scholars.

What makes the poem of Beowulf really interesting, and different from the later romances, is that it is full of all sorts of references and allusions to great events, to the fortunes of kings and nations, which seem to come in naturally, as if the author had in his mind the whole history of all the people who were in any way connected with Beowulf, and could not keep his knowledge from showing itself. There is an historical background. In romances, and also in popular tales, you may get the same sort of adventures as in Beowulf, but they are told in quite a different way. They have nothing to do with reality. In Beowulf, the historical allusions are so many, and given with such a conviction of their importance and their truth, that they draw away the attention from the main events of the story--the fights with the ogre Grendel and his mother, and the killing of the dragon. This is one of the faults of the poem. The story is rather thin and poor. But in another way those distracting allusions to things apart from the chief story make up for their want of proportion. They give the impression of reality and weight: the story is not in the air, or in a fabulous country like that of Spenser's Faerie Queene; it is part of the solid world. It would be difficult to find anything like this in later medieval romance. It is this,

chiefly, that makes Beowulf a true epic poem--that is, a narrative poem of the most stately and serious kind.[29]

Recent criticism has tended in the other direction, seeing the main significance of the poem as lying in the symbolic combats with the monsters. This view involves a certain amount of allegorical interpretation, and, indeed, the poem has often been seen as an allegory, generally of a Christian nature. Thus Father A. L. McNamee treats it as "an allegory of salvation"[30] and he quotes Father Gerald Walsh's statement that the poet has interpreted and unified the pre-Christian legends "into a single allegorical song imitating the Divine Mystery of Redemption."[31] But this type of interpretation does not exclude other ones; it is important to remember that "allegory is still a structure of images, not of disguised ideas, and commentary has to proceed with it exactly as it does with all other literature, trying to see what precepts and examples are suggested by the imagery as a whole."[32] Professor Graham Hough's discussion of allegory is a development from Professor Frye's in the process of showing that allegory is not something

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[29] W. P. Ker, Medieval English Literature (London: Oxford University Press, 1962 (orig. pub. 1912)), pp. 25-26.

[30] A. B. McNamee, S. J., "Beowulf--An Allegory of Salvation?", in Nicholson, op. cit., p. 331.

[31] Quoted from Gerald G. Walsh, S. J., Medieval Humanism (New York, 1942), p. 45.

[32] Frye, op. cit., p. 90.

absolute and distinct:

> Allegory in its broadest sense is a pervasive element in all literature. Unlike scientific or discursive writing, literature hardly finds it possible to present actions, events, objects or characters without at least an implied reference to some wider pattern of human experience. . . . Sometimes this reference is explicit and dominant, and at the extreme of this kind of literature we are aware of allegory as a formal constituent of the work. Sometimes this reference is obscured and recessive, and we shall not be inclined to use the term allegory at all, though quasi-allegorical implications are always likely to make their appearance in commentary and criticism. . . . We have then two extremes, literature in which theme is dominant, and literature in which image is dominant; and a number, perhaps a large number, of gradations in between. [33]

I am brought to the subject of allegory because I feel that the poem moves on two distinct levels, differentiated mainly by the directness of their relationship to reality. The first level, the one which is closest to reality, is made up of what critics call the "historical" elements; this term itself implies that the events and characters described in the passages referred to have about them something that is familiar and recognizable enough to enable the reader to credit them with having really happened. Compared to this, the level composed of the "fabulous" elements has a fairy-tale air about it that perceptibly moves it a step or two further away from reality. In The Nibelungenlied, as we have seen, there is also this "fabulous" level, except that the poem progresses through history away from it, while in Beowulf, in a sense, it is woven throughout the poem.

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[33] Graham Hough, A Preface to "The Faerie Queene" (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1962), p. 105.

In Northrop Frye's scheme of fictional modes, five levels are distinguished. The first is myth, which need not detain us here. The second is romance:

> If superior in degree to other men and to his environment, the hero is the typical hero of romance, whose actions are marvellous but who is himself identified as a human being. The hero of romance moves in a world in which the ordinary laws of nature are slightly suspended: prodigies of courage and endurance, unnatural to us, are natural to him, and enchanted weapons, talking animals, terrifying ogres and witches, and talismans of miraculous power violate no rule of probability once the postulates of romance have been established. Here we have moved from myth, properly so called, into legend, folk tale, märchen, and their literary affiliates and derivatives. [34]

The third of the modes is the high mimetic, in which the hero is "superior in degree to other men but not to his natural environment . . . . He has authority, passions, and powers of expression far greater than ours, but what he does is subject both to social criticism and to the order of nature."[35] This is the mode which includes "most epic and tragedy".[36] The two remaining modes, which also do not concern us, are the low mimetic and the ironic. Professor Frye notes that "European fiction, during the last fifteen centuries, has steadily moved its center of gravity down the list." [37]

I have concentrated on the romance and high mimetic

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[34] Frye, op. cit., p. 33.

[35] Ibid., pp. 33-34.

[36] Ibid., p. 34.

[37] Ibid., p. 34.

modes because these are the two levels with which we are concerned in Beowulf. The "historical" level corresponds, generally speaking, to the high mimetic mode, where the ordinary laws of nature function much as they do in our own lives, and where events and characters are such that without having to establish special canons of probability and possibility they are credible and have a fairly direct relationship to the way we think and act. The correspondence of Frye's statement concerning the romance mode of fiction and what we observe in the "fabulous" elements is evident.

All fiction orders and interprets its raw material, which is life as human beings might live it. The five modes are distinguished, in part, by the manner in which this organization and interpretation are carried out. In the high mimetic mode, which Aristotle would recognize as including his idea of tragedy, the process can be characterized as consisting mainly of the simplification and ennobling of characters and events without altering the cause-and-effect pattern which operates in "real" life. Compared to this fairly direct relationship, the process of romance is more devious and, in a sense, harder to define. But in the effort to relate it to his own experience of life, the reader is frequently forced to resort to seeing romance as a kind of allegory,[38] whether or not the poet meant it to be taken in

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[38] "It is not often realized that all commentary is allegorical interpretation, an attaching of ideas to the structure of poetic imagery." Frye, op. cit., p. 89.

a specifically allegorical way. High mimetic literature, then, interprets life in one way, romance in another, and in the case of Beowulf, where we have the two modes used together in the same poem, intricately interwoven, it becomes possible to interpret the romance elements as serving by way of commentary on the high mimetic elements. The romance elements use the same material as that with which the high mimetic elements are concerned and develop it one step further from reality. In the case of Beowulf, where the high mimetic elements have such a striking atmosphere of historicity and particularity, this means that the fabulous characters and events displace these elements backward into the realm of folk tale and fable. Finally, the fabulous elements begin to look like allegorization of the historical material which forms the background for them. Once again a note on terminology is required: to refer to the "historical" elements, related to the high mimetic literary modes and representing, as far as critics have been able to discover, events and characters of a historical or semi-historical nature, I will be speaking of the "representative" level; for the "fabulous" elements I will use the term "interpretive". This will, I hope, avoid ambiguous and question-begging uses of the term allegory, and will keep in mind the relation between the two modes as they appear in the poem.

Beowulf as a person, it will be noted, has most if

not all of the qualities which Professor Frye attributes to the hero of romance literature. He is "superior in degree to other men and to his environment"--this is the difference in the hero's nature which I have already discussed, although he remains a human being. The laws of nature are suspended so that he is able to spend hwil dæges 'a good part of the day' (1495b) underwater until he is seized by Grendel's mother. Other "prodigies of courage and endurance" include his seven-days' swimming contest with Breca (532b-581a); his escape from Friesland, swimming with thirty battle-dresses on his arm (2354b-2368b); and his youthful exploit of defeating and tying up five giants (420b-421a). There are no explicitly enchanted weapons, although the fact that Grendel is not to be touched by weapons is, rather belatedly (804), explained by a curse which he puts on them. The weapons used by Beowulf constitute a large subject, but it is worth noting that his supernatural strength is too much for any sword he wields except the ancient sword of the giants which he finds in Grendel's cave and with which he beheads Grendel's mother and the corpse of Grendel. The poet never states explitly that it is enchanted, and the comment that it was made by and for giants is not too much out of the ordinary considering that this seems to be the legend supplied for any artifact whose actual origin is not known (the dragon's barrow is another). But the fact that the blade melts in the monsters' blood, although it can be blamed on the corrosive quality of their blood, can perhaps have something to do with the sword

itself. At any rate, a sword the blade of which melts in the blood of its victim belongs in the realm of romance and fantasy. The ogres and witches which Professor Frye mentions remind us that Grendel and his mother are the typical denizens of romance and fitting companions for the dragon.

In the background, on the representative level of the poem, we have the flux of history, the squabbles, treacheries, and conflicting loyalties that are characteristic not only of Migration Age Scandinavia but appear quite as frequently at other times and in other places. The forces of human character which motivate this flux are good (love, loyalty, devotion to some ideal), bad (hatred, envy, spite), or a complex mixture of both. Generally speaking, the good forces are those which tend towards unity, coherence, and order; the bad ones are those which cause discord and anarchy. In our own environment it is hard to distinguish them, but in Beowulf, an old poem written by a wise man, we have the sense of looking backwards through a telescope; we have the advantage of hindsight and prescience, provided by the poet, and the forces motivating people become somewhat clearer and more intelligible.

Besides providing us with this view of human struggle, triumph, and defeat, the poet also comments. I am not now referring to the gnomic statements which he makes, but to the way in which he has constructed the poem. The conflicts of the hero and the monsters, as well as the other fabulous

material in the poem, further organize and interpret this background.

In the second part of the poem, for instance, the background material is largely involved with Hygelac's raid on the Frisians. This expedition seems to have been motivated by a desire for booty [39] and therefore it is an instance of the same kind of greed that the dragon shows in guarding his gold hoard, and that the original hoarders of the treasure seem to have displayed. This greed is the opposite of the generosity which was so highly valued in the society depicted by the Beowulf poet. The dragon becomes the symbol of this greed, and this complex of ideas remains in the reader's mind, even though the concern for the treasure is a secondary motif in the actual fight of hero and dragon.

The centre of the poem offers an illustration of how the different levels (not only the representative and interpretive ones in this case, but various temporal strata as well) fit together. As far as the Danes are concerned, two groups of events, which have already begun and which will come to a climax in the future, are dealt with here. The point at which they meet is the banquet which celebrates Beowulf's victory over Grendel. Wealhtheow's speech concerns the case of Hrothulf and the treachery between close

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[39] R. W. Chambers calls it "a piratical raid". On. cit., p. 2.

relatives which will eventually destroy Heorot and the civilized achievements which it represents. The other group of events is not directly touched on here, but in the reader's mind it becomes connected with this banquet. Beowulf, when he is relating his adventures to Hygelac, goes into it in some detail; it is the one dealing with the Heathobardan feud, involving Ingeld and Freawaru. The dramatic interest here concerns the conflicting loyalties of the hypothetical young warrior whom Beowulf describes and the devastating feud which breaks out in spite of the peace between Danes and Heathobards which had been established.

The main themes and motives involved in these events are gathered first of all in the Finnsburg lay which the scop recites at the banquet in question. Ingeld and Hengest are in similar positions involving conflicting duties and responsibilities; Wealtheow and Freawaru will experience the same misery as Hildeburg of seeing her own and her husband's family fighting each other.

But the interpretive elements of the poem take these themes even further. Hnæf's hall is attacked treacherously by night, much as Heorot had up to that time been attacked by Grendel. Ingeld, Hengest, and Grendel's mother are equally motivated by revenge for the death of a relative or liege lord. It may be protested that this is simply an extension of dryht rules and conventions to the world of the monsters, but this repetition of the same motives and

patterns of behavior on both levels of existence strengthens the plot immeasurably, as the subplot strengthens King Lear, and makes it more complex and meaningful.

The monsters, in the most general terms in which it is possible to discuss them, are the forces of evil, treachery, and disintegration on all levels of human existence, whether originating within man's self or opposing him from without. And Beowulf is essentially the only one in the poem who fights them. But he is unlike the other characters in the poem in that although he takes part in the events of his time he is not part of them; he exists on the same plane as the monsters. He "has no enmeshed loyalties, nor hapless love. He is a man, and that for him and many is sufficient tragedy."[40] I would like to extend this point somewhat. Beowulf is a man, but he is not everyman. He is too idealized to be intended as a representative human being. Rather he represents the good tendencies in man. He "is the best of men and represents what is best in man"[41]; he has strength, nobility, and intelligence unmixed with the baser human instincts and motives. These latter elements are embodied in the monsters, whose "parody of human form . . . becomes symbolical, explicitly, of sin."[42]

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[40] J. R. R. Tolkien, op. cit., p. 68.

[41] A. Bonjour, "Monsters Crouchin, and Critics Rampant", PMLA LXVIII (1953), p. 311.

[42] J. R. R. Tolkien, op. cit., p. 68.

> Beowulf fights as the champion of mankind, against monstrous embodiments of the forces of evil, adversaries so formidable that only the greatest of heroes could possibly cope with them. Our Christian poet makes much of the hero as a monster-queller, not only because a fight with a monster in the nature of the case is more dangerous and more heroic than a fight with another man, but also, and chiefly, because the struggle between hero and monster symbolizes the struggle between good and evil in our earthly life. Here man-to-man fighting lends itself far less readily to treatment in terms of right and wrong.[43]

A moral lesson, then, is implicit in the interpretive elements of the poem, and in that sense the poet can be said to be allegorizing. I think a specifically Christian standard of ethics need not be postulated, although the poet looks back from his vantage point of Christianized England to pagan Scandinavia. He is attempting to assess his poetic heritage, and to evaluate the ethical standards which are involved in it.

On the representative level he presents us with the material of life in which good and evil forces are in conflict as well as inextricably fused, so that choice often becomes a choice between two evils. On the interpretive level the good and evil forces are separated and they clash head-on. To meet the subhuman embodiments of the forces of evil Beowulf must be a superhuman incarnation of the best in mankind, which he is. He fights for mankind, but he is part of the total of man's nature; he represents the

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[43] Kemp Malone, "Beowulf", in Nicholson, op. cit., p. 143.

forces of harmony, loyalty, and unity. In Christian terms he can be seen as man assisted by divine grace, but to the non-Christian nobility, integrity, and intelligence can exist without that, and it is an indication of the strength and complexity of the poem that many interpretations are possible and none exclusively right.

II

THE HERO IN SOCIETY

In the previous chapter I made the statement that Beowulf, although essentially alone and different in nature from his fellow men, was still within the tribal structure, and that rather than being a representative human being he was a personification of the best qualities in man--what man *can be* rather than what he *is*. The present chapter is concerned with showing that in the social context he again represents the best human qualities, the ones that contribute to a stable social structure, protecting and providing for its own members and making every effort to keep inter-tribal peace. Here, rather than concentrating on the difference of Beowulf from other characters in the poem, we study the qualities that bind him to others. After all, he is a key personage in the political and social affairs of two nations, and deserves to be studied from that point of view.

The society described in *Beowulf*, so far as it is historical at all, is that of sixth-century Scandinavia and eighth-century Britain, and is easily recognizable as the forerunner of the feudal system of the later Middle Ages. A lord (whatever title he held, whether chief, king,

or prince, most of which seem to have been used interchangeably in poetry) was attended by a group of thegns, known as the dryht or comitatus. Stenton defines a thegn as a "retainer of noble birth" [1] and in sixth-century Scandinavia his duties would probably be mainly military. In reward for services rendered in time of war and for such peace-time duties as standing guard, attending conferences, and performing other tasks which could not be entrusted to lower servants, the thegn received his keep, as well as arms and armour, ornaments, clothing, horses, and other gifts from his lord. In later centuries, probably after the settlement of a warlike and migratory tribe, the thegn often received a grant of land, and instead of being a warrior who spent his life at court, mainly idle when there was no fighting to be done, he became a landed nobleman who attended court only on special occasions.

The dryht presented in Beowulf seems to be of the earlier type. The important historical source for this is Tacitus, whose description of the Germanic races in the first century A. D. has been taken as presenting an accurate picture of fifth and sixth century tribes of the Baltic coast. He stresses the fact that the loyalty of thegn to chief is personal, "for a successful chief may attract to

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[1] F. M. Stenton, Anglo-Saxon England (2nd ed.; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), p. 479.

him men from many tribes." [2] Tacitus writes:

Iam uero infame in omnem uitam ac probrosum superstiti principi suo ex acie recessisse: illum defendere, tueri, sua quoque fortia facta gloriae eius adsignare praecipuum sacramentum est: principes pro uictoria pugnant, comites pro principe. [3]

[Furthermore, it is lifelong infamy and reproach to survive the chief and withdraw from the battle. To defend him, to protect him, even to ascribe to his glory their own exploits, is the essence of their sworn allegiance. The chiefs fight for victory, the followers for their chief.] [4]

Besides keeping him and rewarding him, the chief had other responsibilities towards his thegn; the most important one was the duty of revenge if he were slain in battle or through peace-time treachery. Similarly, thegns were bound to revenge their comrades' deaths as well. In the field of kinship ties, also, revenge was demanded of the surviving relatives for the slaying of a kinsman.

These, in brief, were the ties that held together the social structure described in Beowulf. But it is evident that they could also serve to split the society apart. It often happened that obligations to kinsfolk and duties to the dryht conflicted, and then the result was a tragic situation such as that of Hildeburg, who saw her own relatives and those of her husband fighting each other. On what I have

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[2] Dorothy Whitelock, The Beginnings of English Society (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1959), p. 29.

[3] Tacitus, Germania, ed. Sidney P. Robinson (Middletown, Conn.: The American Philological Association, 1935), p. 291.

[4] Translation by Whitelock, op. cit., p. 29.

called the representative level of the poem these relationships and obligations are the warp which the woof of individual lives crosses.

In literature the most extensive and detailed picture we have of the functioning of a social structure of this nature is to be found in the Arthurian cycle. Wace, who lived in the twelfth century, writes:

> N'ooit parler de chevalier
> Qui auques feïst a prisier,
> Qui de sa maisnie ne fust,
> Por ce qu'il avoir le peüst;
> S'il por avoir servir volsist
> Ja por avoir ne s'an partist.
> Por les nobles barons qu'il ot,
> Don chascuns miaudre estre cuidot,
> Chascuns se tenoit au meillor,
> Ne nus ne savoit le peior,
> Fist Artus la Reonde Table,
> Dont Breton dïent mainte fable.[5]

[Arthur never heard speak of a knight in praise but he caused him to be numbered of his household, so that he might he took them to himself, for help in time of need. Because of these noble lords about his hall, of whom each knight pained himself to be the hardiest champion, and none would count him the least praiseworthy, Arthur made the Round Table, so reputed of the Britons.][6]

A more elaborate description of the forming and financing of King Arthur's knights is given by Geoffrey of Monmouth:

Insignibus itaque regiis initiatus, solitum morem servans, largitati indulsit. Confluebat ad eum tanta multitudo militum,

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[5] I. D. O. Arnold et M. M. Pelan, La Partie arthurienne du Roman de Brut (Paris: Librairie C. Klincksieck, 1962), p. 73 (ll. 9741-9752).

[6] Trans. Anonymous. In E. M. Jones, op. cit., p. 318.

ut ei quod dispensarat deficeret. Sic cui naturalis inest largitio, licet ad tempus indigeat, nullatenus tamen ei continua paupertas nocebit. Arthurus ergo, quia in eo probitas largitionem comitabatur, statuit Saxones inquietare, ut eorum opibus, quae ei famulabatur, ditaret familiam. [7]

[After he had been invested with the ensigns of royalty, he abided by his ancient wont, and was so prodigal of his bounties as that he began to run short of wherewithal to distribute amongst the huge multitude of knights that made repair unto him. But he that hath within him a bountiful nature along with prowess, albeit that he be lacking for a time, natheless in no wise shall poverty be his bane for ever. Wherefore did Arthur, for that in him did valour keep company with largesse, make resolve to harry the Saxons, to the end that with their treasure he might make rich the retainers that were of his own household.] [8]

One assumes that Hygelac harried the Frisians for a very similar motive.

When we first meet young Beowulf, he is surrounded by the fourteen men whom he has chosen to go to the Danish court with him. This is what might be called a kind of secondary dryht; the primary one is that surrounding the king, Hrothgar or Hygelac, to which Beowulf belongs. When Beowulf and his men arrive at the Danish coast, the warden comments on their audacity, and then describes, in a passage already quoted above (p. 9), how Beowulf stands out among the troop. Similar groupings are to be seen in other

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[7] Geoffrey of Monmouth, Historia Regum Britanniae, ed. Jacob Hammer (Cambridge, Mass.: The Mediaeval Academy of America, 1951), p. 152.

[8] Geoffrey of Monmouth, History of the Kings of Britain, trans. Sebastian Evans; rev. C. W. Dunn (New York: Dutton, 1958), pp. 183-184.

Anglo-Saxon poetry: Andreas and his companions, Satan and his fellow fallen angels in "Genesis B", Byrhtnoth and his men in "The Battle of Maldon". We see Beowulf going in to meet Hrothgar:

> Ārās þā se rīca, ymb hine rinc manig,
> þryðlīc þegna hēap.
> (399-400a)

> [Then the chief arose, with many a warrior
> around him, a valiant band of thegns.]

Beowulf offers his services as a monster-slayer to Hrothgar and, on being accepted, becomes temporarily one of Hrothgar's own thegns. Beowulf asks that, in the event of his being killed by Grendel, Hrothgar will send his armour to Hygelac, in whose family it belongs, because Beowulf had received it from Hrethel, Hygelac's father (452-455a). It is worth noting that, although he is in the temporary service of Hrothgar, Beowulf still thinks of Hygelac as his permanent lord, and takes on the battle with Grendel not so much for his own glory as for Hygelac's:

> Ic þæt forhicge, swā mē Higelāc sīe,
> mīn mondrihten mōdes blīðe,
> þæt ic sweord bere oþðe sīdne scyld.
> (435-437)

> [I therefore disdain, so that Hygelac, my
> liege lord, may be glad of heart, that I carry a
> sword or an ample shield.]

The gifts with which Hrothgar and Wealtheow reward his victories likewise go to Hygelac and Hygd; this is the thegn's way of repaying the care and the gifts he has received from his own lord. The development from a hero like Beowulf,

undertaking adventures in a strange land, to the knight errant of later medieval fiction is clear.

The main levels of significance of the Grendel clan have been discussed in the previous chapter. It is important to notice here that the poet uses terms and ideas connected with the human dryht with regard to them. In a passage already quoted (pp. 11-12), Beowulf says to Hrothgar that he alone will hold council with the giant (425b-426a). The term used for "council" is ding, of which the form "Althing" is used in Icelandic sagas for the parliamentary sessions at which feuds and quarrels were settled.[9] And Hrothgar uses the same group of ideas when he relates the horror of the raid of Grendel's mother:

> Hēo þā fæhðe wræc,
> þē þū gystran niht Grendel cwealdest
> þurh hæstne hād heardum clammum,
> forþan hē tō lange lēode mīne
> wanode ond wyrde. Hē æt wīge gecrang
> ealdres scyldig, ond nū ōþer cwōm
> mihtig mānscaða, wolde hyre mæg wrecan
> gē feor hafað fæhðe gestæled,
> þæs þe þincean mæg þegne monegum,
> sē þe æfter sincgyfan on sefan grēoteþ.
> (1333b-1342)

> [She has avenged that feud in which you last night killed Grendel in violent fashion with hard grips, because he for too long had reduced and killed my people. He fell in battle, forfeit of life, and now has come another mighty evil-doer, wanting to avenge her kinsman, and she has carried the feud far, as may think many a man who in his heart mourns after his treasure-giver.]

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[9] Njal's Saga, trans. and int. by Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1960), p. 18.

Grendel attacks Hrothgar out of jealousy and, one might deduce, revenge for Cain's original expulsion from mankind. But Grendel's mother acts according to strict kinship obligations. The fact that these rules and obligations apply to the Grendel monsters as well as to men enforces the idea that they are parodies of mankind.

I shall not say much more at this time about Beowulf's relationship to the Danes because it is so different from the hero's relationship to his own people. He comes to the Danes as an eager young adventurer, motivated by high ideals and noble intentions, it is true, but he is not involved in the tribal history or character. Had the poet wished him to be so involved, it would have been easy enough to do so; more detailed information concerning Hygtheow's sojourn there and his debt to Hrothgar, now repaid by Beowulf, would have made a closer tie. But the poet does not seem to be interested in creating this kind of contact.

Beowulf goes to Denmark in the role of a saviour, concerned about the Danes but not involved with them. Despite his victory over the Grendel monsters, the nation still faces disintegration to be caused by internal dissension: this is a force which Beowulf can not defeat.

This topic will be discussed further in a later chapter; here it is sufficient to say that Beowulf's "romantic" nature shows itself more clearly in the first than in the second part of the poem. Therefore in the section

dealing with his adventures in Denmark he bears a closer resemblance to the knight errant or peripatetic hero of romance such as is found in Malory or Spenser; like them he is motivated by a more or less disinterested search for adventure, and although he performs great and noble deeds, to him it is the adventure which counts. Hrothgar sees Beowulf's coming as a divine mission: Beowulf himself has heard about the formidable monster and wants to match his own strength against its brute power.

Before plunging into the mere in search of Grendel's mother, Beowulf pays a very graceful tribute to Hygelac and Hrothgar. He says to the latter:

> Wes þū mundbora mīnum magoþegnum,
> hondgesellum, gif mec hild nime;
> swylce þū ōþ mādmas, þē þū mē sealdest,
> Hrōthgar lēofa, Hygelāce onsend.
> Mæg þonne on þām golde ongitan Gēata dryhten,
> geseōn sunu Hrēdles, þonne hē on þæt sinc starað,
> þæt ic gumcystum gōdne funde
> bēaga bryttan, brēac þonne moste.
> (1480 -1487)

> [Be thou a guardian to my thegns, my companions, if battle claims me; also, beloved Hrothgar, do thou send to Hygelac the treasures which thou gavest me. Then the lord of the Geats, the son of Hrethel, may perceive, when he gazes on the treasure, that I found a ring-giver whose outstanding munificence I enjoyed while I could.]

Throughout the poem, the relationship of Beowulf and Hygelac is of considerable importance. A. G. Brodeur writes:

The exceptional prominence of the theme of Hygelac's death in Beowulf, the dramatic character of its use, and the emotion with which it is charged, justify us in regarding it as the

equivalent of what we know in music as the Leitmotiv. . . . The young Beowulf is the hero as loyal thane; the old dragon-slayer is the hero as devoted monarch. And he was both these things because he was Hygelac's nephew. It was Hygelac's death which led to the overthrow of two peoples, both of whom Beowulf was concerned to save. It is Hygelac who supplies the Leitmotiv, which is the interwoven harmony of Hygelac's death and Beowulf's love for him. [10]

This seems to me to be a rather extreme view, but Professor Brodeur takes the idea even further: "Outside the climate of the mutual love between these two, Beowulf would be little more than the monster-queller and marvelous swimmer of folk-tale." [11] But this is certainly going too far. Beowulf is bound to Hygelac by a double bond: in the first place, he is Hygelac's nephew, the son of Hygelac's sister; and in the second place, he is Hygelac's thegn, and thereby obliged to fight for him to the death if need be and, as the passage earlier quoted from Tacitus makes clear, is even bound to ascribe his own achievements and glory to him. Also he passes the rewards he receives on to Hygelac and Hygd. But all this can be accounted for by the obligations which the ties of kinship and *dryht* loyalty demanded. I am not denying that a very real affection exists between the two men; before both of his battles in Denmark Beowulf remembers to ask Hrothgar to send his arms and rewards back to Hygelac, and the concern of the latter is evident when Beowulf returns from Denmark:

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[10] A. G. Brodeur, The Art of Beowulf (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1960), p. 79.

[11] Ibid., pp. 80-81.

Ic ðæs mōdceare
sorhwylmum sēað, sīðe ne truwode
lēofes mannes; ic ðē lange bæd,
þæt ðū þone wælgæst wihte ne grētte,
lēte Sūð-Dene sylfe geweorðan
gūðe wið Grendel. Gode ic þanc secge,
þæs ðe ic ðē gesundne gesēon mōste.
(1992b-1998)

[I was troubled with a heavy spirit, surges of sorrow; I did not trust the voyage of the beloved man; for a long time I begged that you would not go near the murderous spirit but let the South-Danes themselves wage the feud with Grendel. I give thanks to God that I may see thee safe.]

Beowulf, before the battle with the dragon, looks back on their relationship and sums it up:

Ic him þā mādmas, þē hē mē sealde,
geald æt gūðe, swā mē gifeðe wæs,
lēohtan sweorde; hē mē lond forgeaf,
eard ēðelwyn. Næs him ænig þearf,
þæt hē tō Gifðum oððe tō Gār-Denum
oððe in Swīorīce sēcean þurfe
wyrse wīgfrecan, weorðe gecȳpan;
symle ic him on fēðan beforan wolde,
ān-a on orde, ond swā tō aldre sceall
sæcce fremman, þenden þis sweord þolað.
(2490-2499)

[I repaid him the treasures that he gave me, as it was permitted me, in battle, with my bright sword; he gave me land, ancient hereditary property. He had no need among the Gepidae, or the Danes, or the Swedes to seek an inferior warrior and buy him with treasure; for always I would be before the host, alone in front, and so shall do battle through life, while this sword lasts.]

This is an example of the nobility to which the relationship between kinsmen and between lords and their retainers could rise, but I see no reason for making it the only thing which ennobles Beowulf. In the social context he is an image of

what a thegn should be, and he partly justifies L. L. Schücking's interpretation of the poem as a "mirror of a prince." [12]

In the social context, as in the individual one already discussed, there is something slightly unreal about Beowulf. Brodeur states that the hero's character does not develop, that his temper does not change: "We see them [temper and character] reveal themselves appropriately and consistently in every action and situation." [13] His quality of being an ideal character is emphasized (and, in fact, made possible) by the fact that he has no real emotional entanglements. He has no relatives except Hygelac and Wiglaf, and is not put in a position where his loyalty to the royal house of the Geats is in conflict with his friendship for the Danes. He is not married, or if he is his wife is poetically unimportant except as one of the mourners at his funeral pyre (3150a-3155a); thus he escapes the conflict of loyalties that besets Ingeld. This lack of any but the most straightforward and unambiguous ties contributes to our feeling that he is of a slightly different nature from the other characters in the poem.

And yet he is the protective genius of the Geats,

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[12] Levin L. Schücking, "The Ideal of Kingship in Beowulf", in Nicholson, op. cit., p. 36.

[13] Brodeur, op. cit., p. 74.

embodying all that is noble in the character of the race. For them he fights to the death, and part of the final tragedy lies in the fact that even that noble sacrifice is impotent to stave off the destruction of the tribe.

He comes to the throne after the death of Heardred, whose place he refused to take in the latter's minority (2369a-2379a). But Heardred is killed in a battle with the Swedes, and then the kingdom comes into Beowulf's hands:

> hē gehēold tela
> fiftig wintra --wæs ðā frōd cyning,
> eald ēþelweard--.
>
> (2208b-2210a)

> [He ruled well for fifty winters--he was then an old and wise king, the ancient guardian of the fatherland.]

Again the poet thinks in antitheses: Beowulf's long and wise reign provokes thoughts of the dragon, the treasure, how the dragon came to rule the treasure, and how the hoard came to be plundered and the hero was forced into fighting his last battle:

> Þā wæs Biowulfe brōga gecȳðed
> snūde tō sōðe, þæt his sylfes hām,
> bolda sēlest brynewylmum mealt,
> gifstōl Gēata. Þæt ðām gōdan wæs
> hrēow on hreðre, hygesorga mæst;
> wēnde se wīsa, þæt hē Wealdende
> ofer ealde riht ēcean dryhtne
> bitre gebulge; brēost innan wēoll
> þēostrum geþoncum, swā him geþȳwe ne wæs.
>
> (2324-2332)

> [Then was the horror made known quickly and truly to Beowulf, that his own home, best of buildings, and the throne of the Geats, was consumed by surging flames. That was a grief to the soul of the good man, greatest of heart-sorrows; the wise

> one thought that against ancient law he had angered the Ruler, the eternal Lord; his breast was inwardly troubled with gloomy thoughts, as was not customary with him.]

In the next few lines the poet describes Beowulf as guðcyning 'battle king', wīgendra hleo 'protector of warriors', and eorla dryhten 'chieftain of nobles', epithets calling attention to his military prowess and his ability as leader.

We are given the clearest picture of Beowulf as king in the words of Wiglaf to the cowardly retainers. It is the conventional image of the perfect ruler surrounded by a faithful dryht in idyllic joy, an image with which we are familiar from Heorot before the ravages of Grendel, from the court to which the protagonist in the poem "The Wanderer" looks back with nostalgia, and from other Anglo-Saxon poetry. But the very fact that Beowulf's dryht is described in these conventional terms shows how noble and high-minded a ruler he was. Wiglaf says:

> Ic ðæt mǣl geman, þǣr wē medu þēgun,
> þonne wē gehēton ūssum hlāforde
> in bīersele, ðe ūs ðās bēagas geaf,
> þæt wē him ðā gūðgetāwa gyldan woldon,
> gif him þyslicu þearf gelumpe,
> helmas ond heard sweord.
>
> (2633 -2638a)

> [I remember the time, when we were drinking mead, that in the beerhall we promised our lord who gave us rings, that we would repay him for these war-weeds, helmets and hardy swords, if ever this kind of need should befall him.]

Again we have an image of lord and retainer bound by mutual loyalty and affection, and each of them ennobled by the high

regard of the other.

Just before he dies, Beowulf sums up his own reign:

> Ic ðās lēode hēold
> fīftig wintra; næs sē folccyning,
> ymbesittendra ænig ðāra,
> þē mec gūðwinum grētan dorste,
> egesan ðēon. Ic on earde bād
> mālgesceafta, hēold min tela,
> ne sōhte searonīðas, nē mē swōr fela
> āða on unriht. Ic ðæs ealles mæg
> feorhbennum sēoc gefēan habban;
> forðām mē wītan ne ðearf Waldend fīra
> morðorbealo māga, þonne mīn sceaceð
> līf of līce.
>
> (2732b-2743a)

> [I have ruled this people fifty winters; there has been no king among the neighbouring nations who has dared approach me with weapons, to threaten me with terror. I have awaited my appointed destiny in my own homeland, have held my own well; I have not sought strife, nor sworn oaths unrighteously. For all this, though sick with mortal wounds, I can rejoice; for the Ruler of Men will have no cause to reproach me with murder of kin when my life departs from my body.] [14]

He ruled, then, in peace and justice, a king so strong that the neighbouring nations dared not attack, not even the Swedes and Frisians, who hated the Geats and whose feuds with them hung fire during Beowulf's reign.

The dragon and Beowulf's encounter with him are closely connected with dryht ties and obligations. In the first place, the dragon hoards gold, and since generosity was one of the most important qualities of a Germanic nobleman, miserliness and a tendency to hoard possessions were bad. Heremod is cited by Hrothgar as an example of

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[14] Brodeur, op. cit., p. 74 (translation quoted verbatim).

stinginess:

> nallas bēagas geaf
> Denum æfter dōme.
>
> (1719b-1720a)
>
> [he gave no rings to the Danes to achieve glory.]

Possessions were the lifeblood of the dryht society, and their fluid movement was essential for the vitality, even the survival, of the social structure. Whatever the actual reason was for the dying out of the race which once owned the dragon's treasure, in poetic terms the existence of such a hoard is both cause and symptom of the stagnation of the society.

> Þinc fæðe mæg,
> gold on grund(e) guðcynnes gehwone
> oferhīgian, hȳde sē ðe wylle !
>
> (2764b-2766)
>
> [Treasure, gold in the earth, may easily get the better of any man, hide it who will !]

Also this particular gold is cursed (3069-3073); the connection with the cursed gold of The Nibelungenlied reminds us that this is a folk-tale motif, but obviously it has roots that go deep, into the very foundation of the type of thinking that condemned the hoarding of treasure and possessions. In Beowulf treasure in itself is never bad; when properly used it is considered a force for good. But to hoard it is to abuse it:

> Þā wæs gesȳne, þæt se sīð ne ðēah
> þām ðe unrihte inne gehȳdde
> wrǣte under wealle. Weard ær ofslōh

> fēara sumne; þā sīo fǣhð gewearð
> gewrecen wrāðlīce.
>
> (3058 –3062a)
>
> [Then it was seen that fortune did not favour him who unrighteously hid the treasure under the wall. The guardian first killed a great man; then that feud was savagely avenged.]

This is a somewhat mysterious passage, not much clarified by what comes before and after. I take the second sentence to refer to the deaths of the Dragon and Beowulf at each other's hands. If this reading is valid, then the implication is that the curse on the gold–hoard descends on Beowulf's head. By extension that means that his whole nation comes under its influence, because his death signals the beginning of the end for all his people. This, at any rate, is suggested by Professor Lawrence [15] and it does not seem so absolutely unreasonable that it can not fit in with other interpretations of the second section of the poem.

In the previous chapter I quoted O. F. Emerson on the difference between the Grendel monsters and the dragon:

> The devil relationship of Grendel and his mother may be emphasized by comparison with the story of the firedrake. In the latter no single phrase or descriptive epithet applied to the firedrake can be tortured into any connection with devils, or creatures of evil in the Christian sense. [16]

T. M. Gang, although he does not refer to Professor Emerson's article, seems to be aware of the same distinction. Inleed,

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[15] W. W. Lawrence, "Beowulf" and Epic Tradition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1928), pp. 216–217.

[16] O. F. Emerson, op. cit., p. 882.

after discussing various senses of the word "evil", he concludes that the dragon can hardly be considered evil at all. He continues:

> If the poet has regarded the dragon as evil he would have told us quite clearly and repeatedly; and if he had seen in Beowulf's fight against him any reflection of the Twilight of the Gods, or a symbol of the fight between the powers of Good and Evil, he would probably not have been above dropping a hint. But we have nothing of the sort. Instead we have a reference to an ancient curse of which the dragon is as much the victim as the hero; a curse of which, so it seems, Beowulf knows nothing. So that although the inevitability of death for all men is much commented on in this part of the poem, no stress is laid on the heroic paradox of defeat inevitable but unacknowledged, and there is no suggestion that the dragon is anything but a mere participant in a tragedy that started many ages before--before even the gold was buried. [17]

There is some support for this in the poem. Beowulf's agony saturates the last few hundred lines, but the dragon also receives his due from the poet:

> ðona swylce læg,
> egeslic eorðdraca ealdre bereafod,
> bealwe gebæded.
> (2824b-2826)
>
> [The destroyer, terrible earth-dragon, also lay bereft of life, overwhelmed by doom.]

Professor Gang is of the opinion that this reading of the poem does not diminish its tragic impact. On the one hand, in the traditional reading, there is a conflict of mighty opposites, who in the end kill each other. On the other hand, the opponents are in a sense on the same side, both at the mercy of the workings of the curse, which is a

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[17] T. M. Gang, "Approaches to Beowulf", Review of English Studies, n. s. III (1952), p. 7.

mechanical force somewhat like wyrd, going into effect whenever a certain combination of events takes place. I am not entirely convinced by Professor Gang's interpretation, mainly because I see no poetic reason why the dragon, never a friendly kind of creature, should be regarded in quite such a favourable light. Granted that he comes under the influence of the curse, granted that he has been injured by the theft of the goblet and that he is entitled to take revenge, his revenge is out of all proportion to the injustice he suffered, and this excessive vengeance can, I believe, be seen as constituting the same hatred of mankind that motivated Grendel's crimes. To the Geats, the dragon is the instrument of the curse, and no matter how unwilling an instrument he is, he causes enough damage to be a force of evil to the people.

Another way in which the dragon is bound up in the structure of the dryht is through the thief who steals the goblet. The lines dealing with this event are the most badly damaged of any in the manuscript, and readings and interpretations are therefore hypothetical and contradictory. The thief, whether noble retainer or slave, had somehow been expelled from the social order, and stole the goblet in order to buy himself back in. He is one of the exile figures of Anglo-Saxon literature, but the implications are that he was more sinned against than sinning. He flees from vengeful blows (2224b) and has been sorely injured

(2222b). It is through necessity that he steals the goblet, and this brief picture gives us a glimpse into the darker and more ruthless side of the dryht society.

At any rate, the goblet finds its way into Beowulf's hands, and when the dragon begins to wreak vengeance on the Geatish people it is Beowulf who takes up the gauntlet. The obligations and pattern of behaviour are again those of the dryht, applying to men and monsters alike. He must defend his people against this attack, and he choses to fight singlehanded:

> Ic geneðde fela
> guða on geogoðe; gyt ic wylle,
> frod folces weard fæhðe sæcan,
> mærðu fremman, gif mec se mansceaða
> of eorðsele ut gesæceð.
>
> (2511b-2515)

> [I ventured on many battles in my youth; still I, aged guardian of the people, will seek combat, gain renown, if the scourge of men will meet me outside the earth-dwelling.]

With the exception of the passage relating Wiglaf's speech to the cowardly thegns, there is no break in the account of the battle, which is clear and explicit:

This single break is essential: the desertion of the thanes is required, to give full plausibility to the representation of Beowulf's mortal peril. The hero's men had not deserted him in his fight with Grendel, nor even at the Haunted Mere, when they thought him slain. It is the panic of all but one of his bravest men which convinces us that, in the dragon, he faces a foe far more terrible than Grendel or Grendel's dam. The intervention of Wiglaf is equally necessary, both to demonstrate the extremity of the hero's peril and to supply him, in his darkest hour, with a companion as loyal as he himself had been to Hygelac. Moreover, it is the devoted gallantry of Wiglaf which justifies Beowulf's sacrifice: if none of the Geats had stood by him, we should

feel that their impending conquest by the Svear was fully justified, and that Beowulf's death for them was a futile gesture. Moreover, the poet wished to assure us that, fatal as it was to prove to his people, Beowulf's fall did not leave the Geats utterly leaderless.[18]

I think Professor Brodeur is right about this; it is another way of looking at the symmetry of the scene which I discussed in Chapter One. Pagan heroes achieved a kind of immortality by performing deeds noble enough to be remembered by the scops and their audiences, and the greatness of Beowulf is enhanced by the mourning of his people, among whom Wiglaf is the only one named and characterized. Once again the lord and his thegn are mutually ennobled by their admiration of each other. In short, the survival of Wiglaf gives the hero a kind of immortality.

Critics of Beowulf have put the poet's ideas about kingship in a wider context by showing how they are related to medieval conceptions of what the ideal king should be. Such a critic is L. L. Schücking, who finds in the dying king's summary of his own reign the Germanic ideas of loyalty ("Treue") [19] and the strength that keeps enemies away combined with the Augustinian injunctions concerning "wisdom, piety, and kindness." [20]

R. E. Kaske finds in the poem as a whole an example

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[18] Brodeur, op. cit., p. 129.

[19] L. L. Schücking, op. cit., p. 3[illegible].

[20] Ibid., p. 39.

and a glorification of the ideal of "sapientia et fortitudo", considering this "the most basic theme in the poem, around which the other major themes are arranged and to which they relate in various ways." [21] He refers to an article by Ernst Curtius which traces the formula of "sapientia et fortitudo" through literature up to and including the time of Beowulf's composition, finding it significant in "the culture that produced Beowulf." [22] This involves delving into obscure early medieval works with which the Beowulf poet may or may not have been familiar.

Studies of this kind are valuable, but it seems to me that it is more important to realize that the formula finds expression in heroic literature, and is frequently used as the highest praise of a hero. In The Iliad, for instance, Ulysses is described as "wise in the council, foremost in the fight." [23] In The Song of Roland the two are split--"Roland is fierce and Oliver is wise" [24]--and the defeat of the rearguard can be attributed in part to this division. And in The Odyssey of Kazantzakis

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[21] H. E. Kaske, "Sapientia et Fortitudo as the Controlling Theme of Beowulf", in Nicholson, op. cit., p. 269.

[22] Ibid., p. 270.

[23] Homer, The Iliad, trans. Lord Derby (London: Dent, 1948), II, 372.

[24] The Song of Roland, trans. Dorothy L. Sayers (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1959), p. 94 (l. 1095).

Odysseus tells his son that he must surpass him "both in brain and spear".[25] Kaske's article is helpful in pointing out this aspect of the poem, but the formula seems to be more important as a link between heroic poetic characters than as something which the Beowulf poet might have come across in Fulgentius Mythographus.

Other critical positions, such as that of R. E. McNamee, referred to in the previous chapter, treat Beowulf as a redeemer figure and find detailed parallels, particularly in the fight with Grendel's mother and in the last part of the poem, with incidents in the life of Christ. But surely he is a Redeemer in only a very qualified sense of the word, because the defeat of the Geats (who to fit the parallel would have to be a chosen people) is certain at the end of the poem, and will take place in the very near future. Certainly the hero in himself has overtones of a Messianic figure, but as Northrop Frye points out, almost any "hero of romance is analogous to the mythical Messiah or deliverer who comes from the upper world, and his enemy is analogous to the demonic powers of a lower world."[26] The annihilation of the Geats is a touch of tragic irony which nullifies some of the specifically "romantic" elements in the poem's ending.

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[25] Nikos Kazantzakis, The Odyssey: A Modern Sequel, trans. Simon Friar (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1958), I, 206.

[26] Frye, op. cit., p. 187.

Another idea which could be used in this type of criticism but which has not, so far as I know, received much attention, is the late medieval concept of "magnanimity". It is expressed and expounded very clearly in the work of John Milton, and my excuse for using such a late source is that his statement of it fits Beowulf's character very closely. In De Doctrina Christiana Milton writes: "Magnanimity is shown, when in the seeking or avoiding, the acceptance or refusal of riches, advantages, or honours, we are actuated by a regard to our own dignity, rightly understood."[27] Its opposite is "pride, when a man values himself without merit, or more highly than his merits deserve, or is elated by some insignificant circumstance." [28] The bearing which this last statement has on Hrothgar's sermon on pride is too clear to need elaboration.

. Y. Hughes writes that magnanimity was regarded as the supreme heroic virtue, the latter phrase being defined by Tasso as "an excess or perfection of the good, something which has nothing to do with moderation, as the moral virtues have, something divine and distinguishable from Christian charity and the love of God only because its object is true earthly honour rather than heavenly glory." [29] This

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[27] John Milton, Complete Poems and Major Prose, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (New York: Odyssey Press, 1957), p. 1019 (Bk. II, Chap. IX).

[28] Ibid., p. 120 (Bk. II, Chap. IX).

[29] Ibid., p. 477.

whole concept seems to find poetic expression in Paradise Regained, where Satan describes Christ as being

> With more than human gifts from heav'n adorned,
> Perfections absolute, Graces divine,
> And amplitude of mind to greatest deeds. [30]

I am far from suggesting that this view has any greater validity or usefulness than the interpretations of Schücking and Chase; I feel that all of them are only partly right, and that they lose track of the poem in trying to find mechanical and academic explanations for a greatness in both the poem and its hero that lies far deeper than the medieval view on what the ideal king or the ideal man should be.

Basically Beowulf is the protagonist of a work of literature, and should be studied in that context. He is a superhuman but mortal hero, and he dies in defending his people, being the only one who can protect them at that point. He is at once detached and involved: detached in being free from personal involvements other than the loyalty and responsibility which he owes to his overlord and his kinsmen--involvements which might conflict with the performance of his duty--and involved in the sense of being absolutely committed to the welfare of his people. Peter Fisher sees the epic protagonist as "the figure of a human hero embodying in his own person the struggles and trials of his people. The hero did not merely 'symbolize' the trials of the race; he was the actual incarnation of these

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[30] Milton, Paradise Regained, II, 137-139.

trials." [31] But Beowulf is in strength and virtue more than human, and I cannot see the reason for the heavy emphasis on the hero being the "incarnation" of the trials of his race. It does not quite seem to fit Beowulf, although Professor Fisher was writing specifically of this poem.

A more moderate, and probably more accurate position would be to see the hero as being very closely related to his people and the stories told about him as intended to establish his intimate involvement with the historical background of the race. Thus it would be the poem rather than its hero which would record the trials of the race:

> The more original and native kind of epic has immediate association with all that the people know about themselves, and all that part of their experience which no one can account for or refer to any particular source. A poem like Beowulf can play directly on a thousand chords of association; the range of its appeal to the minds of an audience is almost unlimited; on no side is the poet debarred from freedom of movement, if only he remember first of all what is due to the hero. He has all the life of his people to strengthen him. [32]

The same involvement of the hero with his people's past and their destiny is to be found in The Iliad. Hector alone before the Scaean Gates is in the same position as Beowulf in front of the dragon's barrow; alone against the enemy, each of them has his back against the wall, and each of them knows that he has come face to face with

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[31] Peter F. Fisher, "The Trials of the Epic Hero in Beowulf", PMLA LXXIII (1958), pp. 171-172.

[32] W. P. Ker, Epic and Romance (London: Macmillan, 1922), p. 28.

his last opponent. Beowulf's last words before going to meet the dragon show his awareness of the fateful moment:

> Ic mid elne sceall
> gold gegangan, oððe gūð nimeð,
> feorhbealu frēcne frēan ēowerne !
> (2535 -2537)

> [I shall win the gold with valour, or war, the destroyer of life, shall take your lord.]

Hector, after debating for the last time whether he should attempt to buy peace with the restoration of Helen and all the spoils that Paris brought back to Troy, decides:

> Better to dare the fight, and know at once
> To whom the vict'ry is decreed by Heav'n.[33]

Alone he defends his people, who are secure behind the city walls at his back. This image of a whole people awaiting their fate, which depends on the outcome of a single hand-to-hand combat between the hero of the people and his opponent, is remarkably similar in Beowulf and in The Iliad; the fact that the people watch while the fight proceeds emphasizes the feeling that this is a critical moment, that the powers ruling the universe must be left to work their will through the actions of the hero alone: in short, that assistance given the hero would be not only futile but even impious.

Hector is "neither superman, nor demigod, nor god-like, he is a man and among men a prince."[34] Like Beowulf,

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[33] Homer, The Iliad, XXII, 154-155.

[34] Rachel Bespaloff, On the Iliad, trans. Mary McCarthy, int. Hermann Broch (New York: Harper, 1962), p. 39.

he stands head and shoulders above his people, involved with them and yet somehow isolated by the awareness that he is the pillar holding them up, that he is mortal and that his death will bring about the destruction of his nation.

Stanley B. Greenfield compares the hero of epic poetry with his counterpart in tragic drama. In drama, the hero undergoes a process of isolation as the play progresses. His fall is not necessarily accompanied by the destruction of his city or the annihilation of his race. "Though families and houses may be enmeshed in the hero's fate, the catastrophe of tragic drama is individual; the city or nation regroups its forces and retains something of its identity." [35] In fact, the death of the hero frequently has a sense of purgation about it, like the eviction of a scapegoat from a city, bearing all of the people's sins and miseries. One thinks of the Oedipus plays of Sophocles, of Hamlet and of Othello.

On the other hand, in epic poetry "the fate of the hero implies the end of the city and the passing of a way of life, not a cleansing or a re-formation." [36] The ideas contained in this last statement will be explored in more detail in a later chapter; here it is the connection between the death of the hero and the fall of his city which

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[35] Stanley B. Greenfield, "Beowulf and Epic Tragedy", Comparative Literature, XIV (1962), p. 94.

[36] Ibid., p. 95.

is important. Greenfield expresses it in these words:

> W. P. Ker has called attention to the fact that in epic the hero and his people have a community of interests. Though his individual talent and stature loom large, though he may in the end like Hector stand alone, the epic hero nevertheless has strong ties with the people and their tradition.. he is their "hope". . . . [The writer refers to Gilgamesh, Hector, Roland, Arthur, and other heroes.] The values of these heroes reflect the fundamental beliefs and aspirations of their peoples. Beowulf, too, though he fights in isolated glory against the monsters, is in Part I the good right arm of King Hygelac and in Part II King himself of the Geats. His bond with his community is further signalized by the comitatus relationship and by the lengthy historical digressions, which place him in his nation's tradition.[37]

Here we have another attempt at seeing the "fabulous" and the "historical" elements in the poem as part of the same fabric. In the background is the flux of the tribe's history, transmuted into legend through countless oral retellings. In the foreground is Beowulf, the last and greatest of its kings, whose peace-enforcing strength consolidated for a time the kingdom which his predecessors held. His reign seems static and tranquil in comparison with previous ones which were characterized by war and flux. Presumably it was seen as fulfilling the promise of earlier regimes, and that reminds us that Beowulf functions on a level of romance where such fulfilment is possible. The epithets which the poet uses to describe him indicate that Beowulf was an idealized monarch:

> hæleþ hfofende, mǣrne þēoden
> hlāford lēofne. (3141b-3142)

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[37] Greenfield, op. cit., pp. 93-94.

> [excellent prince, renowned warrior, beloved lord.]

With the death of Beowulf the Geats are plunged back into the flux of history, just as Yeats' Oisin, after having spent three hundred years in a state of suspension from time, returns and upon touching the earth receives the burden of three hundred years' age all at once. Perhaps, when the ending of the poem is seen in this way, the dissolution of the nation of the Geats is inevitable regardless of historical fact; it is demanded by the poetic structure as a manifestation of the flux of history, just as Oisin, back on earth, cannot help but be an old man on the verge of death.

The subjection to the passing of time and the mortality of the Geatish nation correspond exactly to those of Beowulf. The poet's statement of the hero's relation to these forces is but another mode of expressing the people's relation to them, and the action of time and flux, suspended and accumulated for fifty years, takes effect in the end.

III

THE HERO AND THE UNIVERSE

Beowulf begins with a brief history of the reign of Scyld Scefing, "an ancient and probably mythical figure" [1] who ruled the Danes three generations before Hrothgar. As a baby he arrived in a boat, surrounded by treasure and gifts, at the Danish coast; he was probably raised at the Danish court and finally became the king. Presumably his unknown origin rather recommended him to that position than disqualified him; one thinks of Moses and King Arthur. After a successful reign, and *tō gesceaphwīle* 'at the destined time' (26b), he died; his retainers put the body in a ship with an abundant supply of treasure, and set the ship afloat. The poet concludes:

> ...en ne cunnon
> secgan tō sōðe, selerædende,
> hæleð under heofenum, hwā þām hlæste onfēng.
> (50b-52)
>
> [Men do not know, counsellors in the hall,
> heroes under heaven, cannot say truly, who
> received that load.]

As well as giving interesting information concerning the eponymous founder of the Scylding dynasty, and concerning

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[1] Chambers, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

pagan ship burials, this story has an important function in the structure of the poem. It serves as an introduction, and has bearing on the actual story only in so far as it deals with the past history of the Danes. But the coming and going of Scyld recalls the famous passage in Bede's Ecclesiastical History dealing with the conversion of King Edwin. One of the king's councillors says:

> The present life of man, O king, seems to me, in comparison of that time which is unknown to us, like to the swift flight of a sparrow through the room wherein you sit at supper in winter, with your commanders and ministers, and a good fire in the midst, whilst the storms of rain and snow prevail abroad; the sparrow, I say, flying in at one door, and immediately out at another, whilst he is within, is safe from the wintry storm; but after a short space of fair weather, he immediately vanishes out of your sight, into the dark winter from which he had emerged. So this life of man appears for a short space, but of what went before, or what is to follow, we are utterly ignorant.[2]

If the mind of Bede can create a beautiful image like this to illustrate what man's life is like under pagan skies, then it is not too much to assume that the Beowulf poet, equally Christian and at least as poetic in his thinking, used the story of Scyld Scefing for a somewhat similar purpose. J. R. R. Tolkien writes of the poet:

> He cast his time into the long-ago, because already the long-ago had a special poetical attraction. He knew much about the old days . . . ; one thing he knew clearly: those days were heathen--heathen, noble, and hopeless. . . . We get in fact a poem from a pregnant moment of poise, looking back into the pit, by a man learned in old tales who was struggling, as it were, to get a general view of them all, perceiving

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[2] Bede, Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation, trans. J. Stevens; rev. J. A. Giles; int. Dom David Knowles (London: Dent, 1958), p. 91.

their common tragedy of inevitable ruin, and yet feeling this more poetically because he was himself removed from the direct pressure of its despair. He could view from without, but still feel immediately and from within, the old dogma: despair of the event, combined with faith in the value of doomed resistance. He was still dealing with the great temporal tragedy, and not yet writing an allegorical homily in verse. [3]

Scyld was ruler over the Danes in a time long past and the brief story of his life and death is, if the similarity of the passage quoted from Bede counts for anything, to be taken in part as an image of the life of man before the arrival of Christianity. No one knew where he came from, no one knew where he went after death. The provision of weapons and treasure seems to indicate a belief in the immortality of the soul and the necessity of being equipped for the after-life. The use of a ship to contain the body, and the launching of this ship show that death, like life, was visualized as a quest or journey. This latter idea is also conveyed by Bede in the passage quoted: the soul is compared to the bird which moves through static surroundings.

The universe in which Beowulf lives and acts is ruled by two forces, wyrd and God. [4] The relationship of these two forces to each other, as well as the degree of

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[3] Tolkien, op. cit., pp. 71, 73.

[4] Klaeber's capitalisation of epithets for deity suggests that the Christian God is referred to in all cases. But in fact many of the epithets are of pagan origin, and it is very difficult to ascertain how far they were intended to bear Christian significance. This will be dealt with in more detail later in this chapter.

Christianization in the words referring to deity, are important in deciding what kind of universe the poet is depicting and what the hero's relationship to it is.

The most important aspect of a study like this, however, is that it deals with a poetic universe. As I stated in the first chapter, I believe that the poet was primarily interested in writing a poem, not in preaching a moral lesson or constructing a "mirror of a prince".[5] As I see it, this means that he fitted the universe to the requirements of the poem, making it poetically rather than theologically consistent.

Tolkien describes the poet as working at "a pregnant moment of poise" between pagan and Christian times, a Christian learned in the ways and the tales of the scops, combining the best of the old and new sets of beliefs. From the evidence presented by the poem he seems to have been of a poetic rather than a rigidly moralistic and didactic temperament. Aware that his point in time was a turning in the road, he must have been concerned to find out how much of the pre-Christian literature he could use for Christian purposes; his use of pagan material and poetic techniques indicates that he admired it and was interested in salvaging it. Sir Frank Stenton, writing as a historian, throws light on the subject by showing how seventh-century Englishmen

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[5]Schucking, op. cit., p. 36.

regarded the poetry of their pre-conversion ancestors:

> To a strict churchman of the period this pagan literature was intensely distasteful, and it was either ignored or discountenanced by the founders of English Christian scholarship. But the bulk of this poetry was addressed to an aristocratic audience, and the English nobility, familiar with the courts of long-descended kings, maintained its interest in heroic tradition. The clergy became more tolerant of this tradition as the danger of a heathen reaction died away, and, indeed, played an essential part in its transmission. The English poetry of the heathen age was first written down by Christian clerks, and most of it only survives in texts which are affected by Christian ideas and imagery. At its height, this influence extends to the permeation of an entire poem with Christian feeling. A poem such as Beowulf, in which aristocratic traditions are enveloped in a Christian atmosphere, is an invaluable record of the intellectual outlook of the men under whose protection Christianity was established in England.[6]

The fusions of pagan poetic conventions and Christian content in such poems as Andreas and Genesis indicate that the Beowulf poet was not alone in attempting this evaluation and fusion. "If . . . the poems were composed early for an audience not far removed from pagan times, then it was natural that the poet should try to combine the old heroic atmosphere with a central figure not repugnant to Christianity."[7] Miss Phillpotts, studying the philosophic leanings of the Nordic races, finds that they place great emphasis on heroic defeat rather than glorious triumph[8] and that Fate, for which the Anglo-Saxons use the term

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[6] Stenton, op. cit., p. 192.

[7] Bertha Phillpotts, "Wyrd and Providence in Anglo-Saxon thought", Essays and Studies, XIII (1927), as summarised in The Year's Work in English Studies, ed. F. S. Boas and C. H. Herford, IX (1928), p. 65.

[8] Ibid., pp. 64-65.

wyrd 'what is to be', is seen as an important force ruling men's lives. The Nordic deities ruling the destiny of men were the Norns, described in The Prose Edda in this way:

> There is a beautiful hall near the spring under the ash tree, and from it come three maidens whose names are Urð, Verðandi, Skuld [Past, Present and Future]. These maidens shape the lives of men, and we call them Norns. There are, however, more Norns, those that come to every child that is born in order to shape its life, and these are beneficent, others belong to the family of the elves and a third group belongs to the family of the dwarfs. . . . Then Gangleri said: 'If the Norns decide the fates of men, they appoint very unequal destinies for them; for some have a good and abundant life, but others have little wealth or fame. Some have a long life and others a short one.'
> High One said: 'The good Norns who come from good stock shape good lives, but those who meet with misfortune owe it to the evil Norns.'[9]

From The Faerie Queene comes another graphic portrayal of the actions of the Fates, here the Mediterranean ones. The mother of Priamond, Diamond, and Triamond goes to see them:

> There she them found, all sitting round about
> The direful distaffe standing in the mid,
> And with vnwearied fingers drawing out
> The lines of life, from liuing knowledge hid.

Upon being questioned, one of them answers:

> Fond dame that deem'st of things diuine
> As of humane, that they may altred bee,
> As chaung'd at pleasure for those impes of thine.
> Not so; for what the fates do once decree,
> Not all the gods can chaunge, nor Ioue him self can free.[10]

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[9] Snorri Sturluson, The Prose Edda, sel. and trans. by Jean I. Young (Cambridge: Bowes and Bowes, 1954), p.44.

[10] Edmund Spenser, The Faerie Queene, in Poetical Works, ed. J. C. Smith and E. de Selincourt (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), Bk. IV, Canto II, stanzas 40 and 51.

The pagan view of Fate, or wyrd, seems to be that a man will survive all dangers as long as his appointed time of death has not yet come, but that once this moment is upon him nothing can save him. I suspect that the invulnerability of Achilles and of Sifrid, with the exception of one spot on the body of each of them, is a poetical equivalent of this.

The actions of the Norns, and the inscrutability of wyrd, correspond in some respect to the Christian ideas of predestination and grace and the inscrutability of God's will regarding man's destiny.

> Without grace, man's free will, although still in existence, cannot overcome these impediments and so remain free from sin or achieve good. Grace, then, confers upon free will the added freedom of being able to give effect to its desires to do good. For St. Augustine, God divided the damned from the saved according to whether He endowed them with special grace (final perseverance) by which they might persevere in goodness and remain free from sin until the end. Such predestination to election or damnation rests with God's will alone. . . . This awareness of the distinction between nature and grace sprang from the tenets of Christian belief: the personal concept of a God who acted voluntarily, as opposed to the necessary hierarchy of intelligences, autonomous and eternal, which made up the Neoplatonic universe. The contrast between the two was the foundation of St. Augustine's outlook; it made grace not just a question of theology but the expression of the Christian Weltanschauung: it put the relation between creator and creature as the central issue.[11]

Grace, then, could be granted or withheld, depending on the will of God, and a man's life was shaped according to that, just as in pagan thought a man's destiny depended on the

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[11] Gordon Leff, Medieval Thought: St. Augustine to Ockham (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1958), pp. 37-38.

will of the Norns or the Fates. Under both systems there was an element of uncertainty in life because a man did not know what was destined for him; he acted in agreement with some code of conduct in which he believed or which was expedient for him and was ignorant of the end. If he were a pagan, nothing he could do had any effect on the time of his death, although heroic deeds could help him to get to Valhalla; if he were a Christian, his ability to persevere rested with the will of God, without which he need not expect to achieve much good. But it was the struggle and the effort which were important, and therefore the code of conduct is central in both sets of beliefs: pride, courage, and defiance for the Nordic pagan; humility, obedience, and charity for the Christian. As has often been noted, these qualities are combined in the last few lines of Beowulf, where the retainers sum up the character of their deceased king:

> Cwǽdon þæt hē wǽre wyruldcyning[a]
> manna mildust ond mon(ðw)ǽrust,
> lēodum līðost ond lofgeornost.
> (3180-3182)
>
> [They said that he had been of earthly kings
> the mildest and the gentlest of men, the kindest
> to his people and the most eager for fame.] [12]

The workings of wyrd or Fate are described in heroic literature in significant and often poignant phrases and images. For instance, the Beowulf poet tells us:

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[12] Translation quoted from Clark Hall, op. cit., p. 177.

> Wyrd oft nereð
> unfægne eorl, þonne his ellen dēah.
> (527b-573)
>
> [Wyrd often saves the undoomed man when his valour is great.]

And the control of wyrd evidently extends to the Grendel kin as well:

> Ne wæs þæt wyrd þā gēn,
> þæt hē mā mōste manna cynnes
> ðicgean ofer þā niht.
> (734b-736a)
>
> [Nor was it his fate that he should devour more men after that night.]

In The Iliad we get a clear statement of exactly the same idea. Hector consoles Andromache:

> Dearest, wring not thus my heart!
> For till my day of destiny is come,
> No man may take my life; and when it comes,
> Nor brave nor coward can escape that day. [13]

Of one of the warriors in the midst of the battle, Homer says:

> O'er him hung the doom
> Which none might turn aside; for from behind
> The fateful arrow struck him through the neck. [14]

And in Njal's Saga: "'Death will catch up with me wherever I am,' said Gunnar, 'when it is so fated.'" [15]

These passages indicate the nature of the pagans' belief in Fate: they saw it as inscrutable and all-powerful, dominating even the pantheon of the gods, and determining

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[13] The Iliad, VI, 564-567.

[14] Ibid., XV, 525-527.

[15] Njal's Saga, p. 156.

the course of a man's life at birth. "The sense in Greek tragedy that fate is stronger than the gods really implies that the gods exist primarily to ratify the order of nature.[16]

There seem to have been two views on the afterlife in northern mythology and they conflict to a certain extent. The most familiar one is that concerning Valhalla, Odin's hall, where the Valkyrior, the warlike maidens who serve that god, bring warriors who have died valiantly in battle. Odin gathers these warriors about him and entertains them until he requires their services in the final great conflict of the gods and men against the giants. This is Ragnarök, the Twilight of the Gods, where the giants will be victorious.[17] But another, equally significant, vision of the afterlife is given in The Prose Edda:

> [All-father] created heaven and earth and the sky and all that in them is. . . . His greatest achievement, however, is the making of man and giving him a soul which will live and never die, although his body may decay to dust or burn to ashes. All righteous men shall live and be with him where it is called Gimlé or Vingólf, but wicked men will go to Hel and thence to Niflhel that is down in the ninth world.[18]

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[16] Frye, op. cit., p. 208.

[17] Thomas Bulfinch, Mythology (New York: Modern Library, n.d., orig. pub. 1855), pp. 264, 278.

[18] Sturluson, op. cit., p. 31. The interesting thing to note about this quotation is the reference to salvation for "righteous men"; Beowulf's soul is described as going to seek sōðfæstra dōm 'the doom of righteous men' (2820b). Of all Beowulf's virtues, whether seen in Christian or pagan contexts, this is the one which the poet picks for this all-important moment in the poem--the instant of the hero's death and the departure of the soul from the body.

And in poetry there is still another kind of immortality which was kept in mind by pagan warriors, from the heroes of Homer to Yeats' Cuchulain: this was the fame on earth which the noble warrior achieved, and it was accessible to anyone who performed the kind of deeds which were registered with "the long-remembering harpers".[19] This immortality is combined with the other-worldly one in these words of Beowulf to Hrothgar:

> Ure ǣghwylc sceal ende gebīdan
> worolde lifes, wyrce sē þe mōte
> dōmes ǣr dēaþe; þæt bið drihtguman
> unlifgendum æfter sēlest.[20]
>
> (1386-1389)

> [Each of us shall await the end of life in this world, let him who can work before death for his fame; that is best for the warrior afterwards.]

"Thus the northern philosophy, though unformulated, depended on the conception of Fate and Fame."[21] Despite the elaborate constructions in Eddic literature of the hierarchy of the gods, these divinities too are ruled by

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[19] W. B. Yeats, "The Green Helmet", in Collected Plays (London: MacMillan, 1960), p. 243.

[20] A whole group of complex ideas is gathered in the word dōm, so that it becomes a summary of most of what this chapter contains. It means 'judgment,' in pagan times the judgment of gods and of one's fellow men on one's life and deeds. It means 'choice', one's own judgment concerning which of two alternatives to take, which in certain instances could affect a man's life and reveal his character. Lastly it can mean either 'glory' or 'doom', whatever decree is passed on man's life and actions.

[21] Phillpotts, op. cit., p. 65.

wyrd, and they will die in the end. The death of the gods in the cosmic conflict of Ragnarök [22] became the engrossing centre of northern mythology, and shows the pantheon of the gods vanquished themselves by wyrd, which was embodied in the giants, the forces of Chaos long banished from the ordered realm inhabited by gods and men. Nordic religious thought, then, conceived Fate and the gods as separate forces, the latter dominated by the former. As we saw in the quotation from The Faerie Queene, Spenser thought the same. Rachel Bespaloff finds this idea in Homer's thought as well, and parallels the Christian God with Fate rather than the Olympians:

> The religion of Fatum and the worship of the living God both involve a refusal to turn man's relation to the divine into a technique or a mystical formula. The God of the Bible can be touched but not suborned by prayers; propitiatory rites are capable of appeasing the Olympians but not of deflecting Fatum. [23]

As a consequence, "the Amor Fati, not polytheism was the real obstacle to faith for the ancients." [24] The missionaries had, this would suggest, relatively little trouble getting rid of Thor, Odin, and their fellow gods, but Fate was a greater problem. The northern pagans had their

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[22] W. P. Ker suggests that this myth arose "in the period of migration and conquest, when the Northmen first became acquainted vaguely with the ideas of Christianity" and felt the end of their own beliefs at hand. The Dark Ages (New York: New American Library, 1958), p. 40.

[23] Bespaloff, op. cit., p. 110.

[24] Ibid., p. 117.

vision of Ragnarök, where the gods would be defeated and killed; the agents of their destruction were the giants, the Jötun, who in the beginning of things had been banished to the outer circle of the created universe.[25] But one imagines that the force behind these agents of destruction was wyrd, decreeing the death of gods as well as of men. The gods might die, but wyrd was the real power, and it was with wyrd that the Christian God eventually came face to face.

The famous letter of Pope Gregory to the English mission shows what methods of conversion were recommended.

> The temples of the idols in that nation ought not to be destroyed; but let the idols that are in them be destroyed; let holy water be made and sprinkled in the said temples, let altars be erected, and relics placed. For if those temples are well built, it is requisite that they be converted from the worship of devils to the service of the true God; that the nation, seeing that their temples are not destroyed, may remove error from their hearts, and knowing and adoring the true God, may the more familiarly resort to the places to which they have been accustomed. And because they have been used to slaughter many oxen in the sacrifices to devils, some solemnity must be exchanged for them on this account, as that on the day of the dedication, or the nativities of the holy martyrs, whose relics are there deposited, they may build themselves huts of the boughs of trees, about those churches which have been turned to that use from temples, and celebrate the solemnity with religious feasting, and no more offer beasts to the devil, but kill cattle to the praise of God in their eating, and return thanks to the giver of all things for their sustenance; to the end that, whilst some gratifications are outwardly permitted them, they may the more easily consent to the inward consolations of the grace of God. For there is no doubt that it is impossible to efface every thing at once from their obdurate minds; because he who endeavours to ascend to the highest place, rises by degrees or steps, and not by leaps.[26]

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[25] Ker, The Dark Ages, p. 40.

[26] Bede, op. cit., pp. 52-53.

The policy for Christianizing the British, then, seems to have been one of gradual conversion, utilizing those parts of the pagan belief which were "well built". Supported by the policy of Pope Gregory, the early missionaries would presumably start their efforts by presenting the aspects of Christian thought which would fit best with pagan beliefs. As a consequence, "the early converts were dominated by the ideas of Heaven, Hell, and the justice of God, the more readily because these conceptions filled in gaps in their system and made it easier to understand. The universe became more ordered." [27] The ideas of Heaven and Hell were by no means strange to the Nordic pagans. They had always believed that the ordered and habitable part of creation was surrounded by Chaos, and saw the human world as Midgard, middangeard, the middle earth, bordered on all sides by hostile areas inhabited by forces threatening destruction to gods and men. [28] The word "Hell" is itself of Teuton ancestry, originating in the name of Hel, the goddess of the underworld. [29]

Another question basic to this discussion is this: how far has the poet infused his use of the term "God" and other epithets for deity with Christian meaning? We

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[27] Phillpotts, op. cit., p. 65.

[28] Ker, The Dark Ages, pp. 40-41.

[29] Sturluson, op. cit., p. 56.

know that the word "god" has Teutonic roots, and existed before the arrival of Christianity. The word Metod comes from Old Saxon, and is related to an Old Norse word meaning 'ordainer of fate'. Aryhten had its original meaning of 'chief of a dryht' extended to include 'Chief of the Heavenly Aryht'. Other terms for the deity, such as Almihtig, Alwalda, Scippend, and Wuldorcyning are translated from Latin terms: it is significant that they are used much less frequently in the poem than the former group of pagan words with partially or completely Christianized significance. [30]

The problem of how Christian, in degree and quality, Beowulf is, is a difficult one to solve. In the first place, diametrically opposed views exist. F. A. Blackburn, whose article, though originally published in 1897, is still referred to as an authoritative expression of his viewpoint, states: "It is admitted by all critics that the Beowulf is essentially a heathen poem" and concludes "that the Beowulf once existed as a whole without the Christian allusions." [31] Dorothy Whitelock, on the other hand, finds that the Christian element in the poem "is not confined to a few--or even to a number--of pious ejaculations in the author's own person or in the mouths of his characters;

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[30] Please refer to the chart at the end of this chapter (p.

[31] F. A. Blackburn, "The Christian Coloring in the Beowulf", in Nicholson, op. cit., pp. 1, 21.

an acceptance of the Christian order of things is implicit throughout the poem." [32] Furthermore she argues that since the poem is so thoroughly Christian it must have been written at a late date; [33] this, it seems to me, is basing one hypothesis on another and using each to prove the other one. But her views are shared by other critics, among them Father M. B. McNamee:

> What the Beowulf-poet has done in the first two episodes of the poem is to tell the story of salvation twice in allegorical terms. . . . In the third and last episode of the poem . . . he allegorizes the story of salvation once again, this time dramatizing the price of salvation--the very life of the Savior Himself. [34]

Evidently the problem is complicated by the fact that theories as to the amount of "Christian coloring" in the poem are related to other facets of criticism. We have seen that Miss Whitelock considers it to be intimately involved with the dating of the poem; Professor Blackburn connects it with the once-vexed question of the poem's unity; Father McNamee sees it in the context of other medieval literature, not necessarily of a heroic nature, and treats it as an allegory.

The contribution of anything new to all this is beyond the scope of this study. The present chapter is concerned with the place of the hero in the universe which the poet

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[32] Dorothy Whitelock, The Audience of "Beowulf" (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1950), p. 4.

[33] Ibid., p. 14.

[34] M. . McNamee, S. J., op. cit., p. 347.

describes, a relationship which is important in any literature dealing with cosmic questions, from Homer's Odyssey to that of Kazantzakis.

As I see it, part of the difficulty experienced by critics dealing with this question is that it is not as simple as it looks to distinguish the Christian and pagan components of the poem. The poet uses for the most part elements from the two sets of beliefs which can be made compatible, and the result is a fusion rather than a clash. The remoteness and austerity of the pagan wyrd is matched by the poet's expression of his vision of God; Christian justice merges with the pagan's expectation of appropriate rewards for his earthly deeds of prowess. Both forces are inscrutable. In both sets of beliefs the destiny of a man is decided at birth and a distinction between the elect and the damned is made. Both powers rule the lives and actions of men, but in a legal rather than in a personal way. Both, for instance, keep a certain check on Grendel's activities, but the fact remains that Grendel is permitted for twelve years to raid Hrothgar's court. We are told that Grendel's career was put to an end by God and the man's strength (1055b-1057a), but also that wyrd would not allow him to eat any more men after that night (734b-736a).

There is one important instance where God and wyrd are seen as having different and in fact conflicting functions. When Beowulf arrives in Denmark, Hrothgar tells

him about the past ravages of Grendel:

> is mīn fletwerod
> wīghēap gewanod; hīe wyrd forswēop
> on Grendles gryre. God ēabe mæg
> þone dolsceaðan dǣda getwǣfan !
> (476b-479)

> [My court retainers, my war troop is diminished; wyrd, the terrorizing of Grendel, swept them away. God easily may restrain the deeds of the wild ravager.]

The implication is that Grendel, acting as the agent of wyrd, can be restrained by God. This passage has been taken as indicating that God is a power superior to the pagan wyrd and able to control its actions. But this contradicts other parts of the poem, and it makes the poet's retention of wyrd a farce and makes nonsense of other passages which have already been considered.

In discussing this passage, I think the important thing to keep in mind is that Hrothgar speaks the words. We know from other parts of the poem that he is the most religiously-minded character in the whole of Beowulf; it is natural to his way of thinking to blame God for not having restrained Grendel, whether in actual fact the poet conceived this as being possible or not. The one thing we can be sure of is that the ravages of Grendel were part of the foreordained destiny of the Danes, analogous to other forces of dissolution like human treachery or the action of time.

Another troublesome passage which could be discussed here is the famous one describing the "reversion" of the

Danes to pagan sacrifices in an attempt to stop Grendel's raiding (175-188). Of course it is not a reversion at all, because the Danes were pagan at the time, as pagan as the Geats who check the omens before Beowulf's voyage to Denmark (204). One remembers Rachel Bespaloff's statement that sacrifices can influence the gods but not the Eaton. The reason for the confusion surrounding the passage is that the poet makes such an important issue of the Danes' sacrifices, and says that they did not know God (180b); this being the case, it is hardly surprising that they offered sacrifices in heathen temples. If the poet had described the sacrifices as he describes other pagan rites such as the three great funeral ceremonies no one would have been bothered and the critics who used to mine the poem for information about Germanic history and ways of life would have been delighted. In view of all this I am inclined to agree with Blackburn's statement that the passage is probably an interpolation.[35] Such an occurrence should be no cause for wonder in a poem which even in its written form must have gone through many copyists' hands, and need not be taken as casting aspersions on the basic unity of the work.

Confusion and blurring of this sort can have little to do with any didactic or doctrinal purpose, which confirms

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[35] Blackburn, op. cit., p. 16.

my idea that the poet, while he was writing _Beowulf_ (whatever he may have thought at other times), was chiefly concerned with writing a poem, and that the universe he presents has some specific purpose in the poetic structure. The poetic structure which he was creating was a tragic one, and a universe of a specific type was therefore envisioned, a poetic and not a theological one.

To describe this type of poetic universe I have coined the term "open-top". This is not intended to imply that there are no heaven and no deity at the top of the universe, because there is ample evidence in the poem of their existence. Rather it articulates my impression that the events of the poem take place in a universe bound by laws: natural, inscrutable, and ineluctable. The poet uses the term _wyrd_ and names like _Fryhten_ or _Metod_ for these laws. Professor Frye, with reference to this law ruling the universe, writes: "Its names are variable but the form in which it manifests itself is fairly constant. Whether the context is Greek, Christian, or undefined, tragedy seems to lead up to an epiphany of law, of that which is and must be."[36] When one remembers that _wyrd_ is 'what must be, what will be', the relevance of this statement to the present discussion becomes evident.

This open-top universe is found in other tragic poetic

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[36] Frye, _op. cit._, p. 208.

structures, for instance in The Iliad and in Macbeth. Despite the activities of the Olympians,[37] the real force ruling Homer's universe is the Fatum, and the impossibility of circumventing its decrees contributes to the bulk of the poem's tragedy. By contrast, The Song of Roland is comedic[38] and its universe is ruled by a benevolent and interested God taking part in the affairs and actions of men. Roland's last words are a prayer to God to save his soul, and God, with the lord's concern for a faithful vassal, sends emissaries to earth for that purpose:

> His [Roland's] right-hand glove he's tendered
> ...to Christ,
> And from his hand Gabriel accepts the sign.
> Straightway his head upon his arm declines;
> With folded hands he makes an end and dies.
> God sent to him His Angel Cherubins,
> And great St Michael of Peril-by-the-Tide;
> St Gabriel too was with them at his side;
> The County's soul they bear to Paradise.[39]

There is no emphasis on Fate in The Song of Roland; the actions of men are seen as being free, and as being closely related to the rewards or punishments assigned by the Christian God who watches the battle. Roland's God

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[37] Rachel Bespaloff interprets them as providing a kind of social comedy: "The absolute futility of beings who are exempted by Fortune from the common lot achieves, in the Immortals, a kind of showy, decorative stateliness." On. cit., p. 73. Her phrasing recalls the depictions of these gods by eighteenth-century French painters.

[38] This term was coined, so far as I know, by Michael Laughlin to indicate a theme and structure rather than a mood of comedy; I take it that The Divine Comedy is a prototype of this structural pattern, and the source for the term.

[39] The Song of Roland, pp. 142-143 (ll. 2389-2396).

does not meddle, as do the Olympians; nor is he as inscrutable and immovable as Fatum: he is a personal protector for the warriors on the right side and a stern judge for those on the wrong side. The battle is being fought on the basis of conflicting ideologies, Christian against Pagan, and God is partisan, rooting for his own side.

But some of the tragic impact is lost in this type of poetic universe, although heroic action is still possible; the more nobly a warrior fights, the better an afterlife he can expect. And in fact he can count on this, in a universe so constructed, while a warrior in a tragic poem, no matter how hard he works to achieve fame after death, is not sure of eternal bliss and may be remembered only in the songs of the scops.

As I see it, a tragic poem requires at its head an inscrutable and impersonal deity, whether it is seen merely as an impersonal force like a law or whether it is personified and deified as God. One of its essential qualities is that it cannot be propitiated or cajoled either by sacrifices or by valorous deeds: a man's destiny is decided at his birth and when his time comes to die nothing can save him. The hero functioning in this open-top universe is left with a great deal of responsibility. Contrasting the Olympians with the heroes of The Iliad, Rachel Jespaloff writes: "Everything that happens has been caused by them [the gods], but they take no responsibility,

whereas the epic heroes take total responsibility even for that which they have not caused." [40]

The comparison of Beowulf and other tragic literature, including the greater Icelandic sagas, with hagiographical literature including, by way of comparison from the Anglo-Saxon period, Bede's Ecclesiastical History, shows what kind of deity is required for a tragic poem: an impartial and inscrutable ruler rather than a benevolent father whose activities and opinions are made manifest to men in miracles and other signs of interest and concern. The nature of the deity in Beowulf, then, is formed by the requirements of the poem itself, rather than the beliefs of the poet and his audience. The transition from pagan to Christian beliefs, whether or not the poet was seriously concerned about it, is of secondary importance, belonging to the social context of the poem rather than to the work itself.

The relationship of Homer's Olympians with the Fatum requires further consideration. One has the feeling, at the most crucial moments in The Iliad, that the heroes circumvent the actions and judgments of the Olympians and make direct contact with the Fatum. Hector's words to Andromache, quoted above (p. 78), illustrate this. The "middle heaven" (to add for a moment a fourth level to

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[40] Bespaloff, op. cit., pp. 73-74.

the universe) of Olympus might as well not exist, and its inhabitants do not cloud and obscure man's relationship with the fatum, do not protect man from the consequences of his actions, as happens to Paris when Venus carries him out of the single combat with Menelaus,[41] nor interfere in the battle for their selfish ends. Of course the gods, by concerning themselves with the affairs of men, hindering or assisting them, are acting as the agents of the fatum, bringing about the predetermined destinies of men and acting no more freely than men themselves do, but still, because of their presence, one has sometimes the feeling of watching a puppet show, with the strings directing the gods only slightly less visible than those directing men.

In Beowulf this "middle heaven" is empty; there is nothing to serve as intermediary between wyrd and man. Partly as a result of this, I think, we have more of a feeling that man is free to do what he likes. His actions, though directed towards a predetermined end, are not controlled in specific detail by divine interference. Wyrd's hand (or God's) is seen chiefly in the final events of a man's life, in the granting of victory or defeat, life or death. Here again the Beowulf poet blurs the Christian God and the pagan wyrd: the latter is called metod manna gehwæs 'ruler of every man' (2527a) and of the former, in

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[41] The Iliad, III, 436-446.

a more frequently quoted phrase, it is said that:

> mihtig God manna cynnes
> weold wīdferð.
>
> (701-702a)

[Mighty God rules mankind forever.]

As we have seen, the date of man's death is predetermined in the universe as the Beowulf poet sees it. Thus Scyld Scefing departs:

> to gescæphwīle
> felahrōr fēran on frēan wǣre.
> (26b-27)

[at his destined time, most valorous, to travel into his lord's keeping.]

But later it is said that not even the wisest of men know who received the funeral ship containing his body (50b-52).

Beowulf himself, old and rich in winters, is aware that his fight with the dragon will be his last:

> Him was geōmor sefa,
> wǣfre ond wælfūs, wyrd ungemete nēah,
> sē þone gomelan grētan sceolde,
> sēcean sāwle hord, sundur gedǣlan
> līf wið līce; nō þon lange wæs
> fæorh æþelinges flǣsce bewunden.
> (2419b-2424)

[His spirit was sad, restless and ready to depart; the fate immeasurably near which would greet the aged man, seek the treasure of his soul, part asunder life from body; not for long was the nobleman's spirit to be bound in flesh.]

He says of his own ancestors:

> Ealle wyrd forsweop
> mīne mǣgas tō metodsceafte,
> eorlas on elne; ic him æfter sceal.
> (2814b-2816)

[Fate swept all my kinsmen, nobles in their glory, to their destined end; I must go after them.]

The poet says of Beowulf that his soul seeks soðfæstra dōm 'the doom of righteous men' (2820b); this has frequently been taken as referring to the Christian Day of Judgment, but as I noted above (p. 79) a similar conception of the afterlife appears in The Prose Edda. Balancing the above passage, we have Wiglaf's opinion of what will await his deceased chief in the afterlife:

hē longe sceal
on ðæs waldendes wǣre geþolian.
(3108b-3109)

[He shall remain long in the Lord's keeping.]

But if the poet wanted the reader or listener to make associations with the Day of Judgment he would have made it more clear: as Professor Gang says in another connection, he is not above dropping a hint.[42] All the evidence points in one direction: for poetic or other purposes, the poet is more or less deliberately blurring the distinctions between the Christian God and the pagan wyrd. Having decided to ignore the pantheon of Nordic deities, he has only wyrd left, and one thing he has learned by reflecting on the significance of "the pregnant moment of poise" is that the difference between these two great powers is not insuperable; like Pope Gregory, he is aware that a gradual transition

[42] T. M. Gang, op. cit., p. 7 (quoted above p. 57).

is not only possible but perhaps even desirable.

But the situation is not this simple, because the power which rules the universe in Beowulf is complex in nature and function. It is in part the Old Testament deity ruling and judging men, and in that capacity is closely related to pagan wyrd. But there are other passages, mainly short ones, where a more personal deity is referred to. Beowulf and his men thank God for a safe journey; as noted earlier, it is difficult to say which God this is, the pagan one whose will the Geatish elders tried to discern by watching the omens, or the Christian one. Hrothgar and Wealtheow repeatedly thank God for having sent Beowulf to their assistance; the coast guard, upon leaving the Geats near Heorot, commends them to God's care, and so on.

From this it would seem that the workings of the Christian God are seen as being also of a benevolent kind, concerned to some extent with men's actions and safety--at least, they are seen in this way by the characters in the poem. But it is important to note that this function of God is confined almost exclusively to Part One of the poem. The chart at the end of this chapter has been divided into columns for Parts One and Two in order to show that the Deity, other than wyrd, is referred to much more often in Part One than in Part Two.

For the present study, it is the hero's relationship to this universe that is important, and a good deal

has been said about it already. Beowulf is not of divine parentage, as Achilles is, or even of divine descent like many other Homeric heroes. However, divine influence is evident in his superhuman strength. In Christian terms, this seems to be an indication that he is blessed with grace; this gift, like that of the strength of thirty men, is meant to be used for the benefit of other men as well as of its possessor, and Beowulf, like Samson, interprets it in this way. So does Hrothgar, who describes Beowulf's renowned strength and then concludes;

> ..ine hālig God
> for ārstafum ūs onsende,
> tō West-Denum, þæs ic wēn hæbbe,
> wið Grendles gryre.
>
> (381b-384a)

> [Holy God has sent him to us, to the West Danes, for assistance against Grendel's ravages, as I hope.]

We know that this is so: Beowulf, having heard about Grendel's raids, decided to go to Hrothgar's assistance because the Danish monarch was short of men. Moreover, he was young and high-spirited, and the search for adventure can have had no little part in prompting him to go. And Brodeur points out another possible reason, which is never referred to in the poem: he could be considered to be repaying Hrothgar's kindness to Hygelac, Beowulf's father. It seems to have been his destiny to fight against

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[43] Brodeur, op. cit., p. 113.

non-human opponents, which meant that his battles, seen poetically, reduce themselves to conflicts of the human against the non-human, the ordered against the chaotic.

As King of the Geats, Beowulf is not only super-human in physical strength but by virtue of his position is an intermediary between his people and the powers ruling the universe. "In a world in which the kingdoms of men depend upon the realms of the divine, the earthly king moves in the vital strand that binds them together."[44] Had the poem been written around 530 A. D., just after the events it deals with had taken place, there might have been remnants of priestly functions left in its depiction of kings and chieftains. But this was an aspect of paganism that the poet could not condone, even if there was anything of the sort in his source material. Anthropologists would have been pleased to find in Beowulf evidence of pagan Germanic religious practices, rituals and ceremonies in which the king fulfills his function as priest, but there is nothing like this in the poem. When Grendel attacks the Danes, we are told, the people offer sacrifices to their pagan deities, but there are no details given, just an outright condemnation of this procedure. Beowulf, when he is told of the dragon's raid, decides without any hesitation to meet the monster in battle, which sounds more like

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[44] W. A. Chaney, "Grendel and the Nibelungs: A Legal View of Monsters", PMLA LXXVII (1962), p. 514.

Arthurian legend than The Golden Bough. The poet's winnowing hand is in evidence; he banned everything that was exclusively heathen or Christian. Therefore there is no reference to "the saints, to the cross or to the church, nor to any Christian rites or ceremonies," [45] the absence of which has caused critics so much concern. Of all the possible non-Christian rites and ceremonies which the poet could have described, the three funerals are the main ones which he actually does use, and their function in the poem justifies their use. These are full of poetic power, and, though specifically pagan ceremonies, have an element of sacrifice about them which makes them almost non-denominationally religious.

In studying the place of the hero in the universe, it is important to distinguish between what he himself says and what other characters and the poet say. The motivation for Beowulf's trip to Denmark requires further attention from this point of view. First of all, the poet says that Beowulf had heard of Grendel's ravages and went to Hrothgar's assistance because the latter was short of men (194-201); secondly, Beowulf tells the coast warden that he has come to help Hrothgar burh holdne hige 'with honourable intent' (267a); thirdly, his words to Hrothgar seem to indicate that the wise men of the Geats urged him to go, and that

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[45] H. M. Chadwick, "The Heroic Age, An Excerpt", in Nicholson, op. cit., p. 74.

he has done so for Hygelac's glory as well as his own (415-440a). It is Hrothgar who interprets his voyage as being a manifestation of the grace of God taking pity on the Danes and sending them assistance against Grendel.

On arrival in Denmark, Beowulf thanks God for a safe journey; there is no reason why this should not be the same deity whose will concerning that same voyage the Geatish elders tried to discern by checking the omens. Also, in his conversation with Hrothgar, he says that *Drihten* will decide the battle, which of the two opponents will be taken by death (440b-441). Not knowing what the ruling powers of the universe have decreed for either himself or Grendel, this is a reasonable standpoint to take. He expresses a similar sentiment later, just before he lies down to wait for Grendel, and uses the same epithet for the deity. The solution is phrased in the proper terms:

> Bēowulfe wearð
> gūðhrēð gyfeþe; scolde Grendel þonan
> feorhsēoc flēon under fenhleoðu,
> sēcean wynlēas wīc; wiste þē geornor,
> þæt his aldres wæs ende gegongen,
> dōgera dægrīm.
> (818b-823a)

> [To Beowulf was given glory in the battle; Grendel, mortally wounded, had to flee thence to seek his joyless dwelling in the waste moors; he knew all too well that his life, the number of his days, had come to an end.]

The gist of Hrothgar's speech of thanks to Beowulf is that it was the grace of God which enabled the hero to accomplish that deed. It is a hymn of thanksgiving, the

tone of which reminds one of Bede's writings. Beowulf's exploit is greeted as a kind of miracle:

> Á mæg God wyrcan
> wunder æfter wundre, wuldres Hyrde.
> (931b-932)
>
> [Ever may God, the King of Glory, work wonder after wonder.]

In Beowulf's description of the battle, there are two references to Metod, one to the effect that Beowulf could not restrain the wounded Grendel from fleeing because Metod did not permit it, and the other to Grendel's doom, the judgment of the glorious Ruler who will sentence him. Both references indicate a universe ruled by law and fate.

Hrothgar and Beowulf both see the universe in a way that suit their respective characters. Hrothgar, old and burdened with twelve years of suffering at Grendel's hands, as well as thoughts of his own not-too-distant death, looks for a benevolent deity who will recognize these sufferings and provide a means of help against the monster. Beowulf, the young and energetic hero, prefers to take some of the credit for his triumph. The one blot on his victory is that he has only an arm to show, not Grendel's whole body; this he is quite willing to attribute to the wishes of the ruling power.

I do not want to take this any further; it is an obvious enough point in most literature, but tends to complicate the already complex picture in Beowulf. What is important to note is that from another angle this supports

my earlier statement that the poet created a universe to suit the purpose of the poem. The dominant universe is the one which Beowulf sees; he is a hero of epic and tragic qualities, and the ruling powers of the universe are shaped around that fact.

The effort to discern the nature of the universe as the hero sees it is an important part of reading tragic literature. As already mentioned, the hero exists as an intermediary between men and the divine.

> The tragic hero is very great as compared with us, but there is something else, something on the side of him opposite the audience, compared to which he is small. This something else may be called God, gods, fate, accident, fortune, necessity, circumstance, or any combination of these, but whatever it is the tragic hero is our mediator with it.[46]

It is through his position as mediator that he gives the impression of being related to men and involved in human society and at the same time a stranger, an outsider, with some of the qualities of a divine figure. This sense of isolation is often enhanced by a sense of mystery and reserve about him: "the mystery of their communion with that something beyond which we can see only through them, and which is the source of their strength and their fate alike."[47]

The graph at the end of the chapter indicates the differences which exist between Part One and Part Two of

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[46] Frye, op. cit., p. 207.

[47] Ibid., p. 208.

the poem as far as divine control go. I have already referred to passages in Part One that indicate the care of men which God sometimes shows. The sending of Beowulf to Denmark, and the saving of Beowulf in the fight with Grendel's mother are the two chief instances. Beowulf himself, when he returns to Heorot and reports his success to Hrothgar, attributes his second victory to divine assistance. It was a hard battle; the odds were greater here than they had been in the fight with Grendel, mainly because the female monster had to be met on her own ground:

> ætrihte wæs
> gūð getwǣfed, nymðe mec God scylde.
> (1657b-1658)
>
> [My fighting was almost brought to an end, except that God shielded me.]

But the ruler of men granted that the ancient sword be hanging there in the cave, and with that Beowulf slew Grendel's mother. Any attempt to prove that this is not a mode of divine grace and protection would be futile. Beowulf's strength already shows him to be favoured of the gods, and in Part One there are these two other instances which indicate that, to a slight degree, there is a benevolence about God which persuades him to perform a few miracles. This does not contradict my previous statements concerning the inscrutability and the remoteness of God which relates him to <u>wyrd</u>. In the second part of the poem, where the accumulated tragic energy finally finds expression, there is no place for miracles.

Professor Schücking discusses ideas concerning man's relation to his universe, mainly as they are presented in Part Two of the poem, in connection with Beowulf's death:

> Beowulf's thought that the sight of the earthly goods which he acquired makes death easier for him is . . . decidedly un-Christian. There is little harmony between the Christian penitential axiom that we are all sinners, and the beautiful pride of duty-performed that emerges from his parting words with which he goes confidently before his Judge.[46]

This recalls the discussion of magnanimity in the previous chapter. It is important to emphasize here that magnanimity was a heroic virtue, in fact the supreme heroic virtue, which was defined by Tasso as "an excess or perfection of the good, something which has nothing to do with moderation, as the moral virtues have, something divine and distinguishable from Christian charity and the love of God only because its object is true earthly honour rather than heavenly glory."[47] Tasso considered, then, that despite the fact that heroic virtue is not concerned with Christian charity, it has something divine about it; in the context of Beowulf we can see that this comes from the close relation between the hero and his universe. The divine element, that which sets Beowulf above his people and makes him a kind of redeemer figure, is there in the contact between Beowulf and his God.

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[46] Schücking, op. cit., p. 37.

[47] Quoted by Hughes in Milton, op. cit., p. 477.

Other important elements in the quotation from Tasso are the distinction between the excess of perfection rather than moderation, and the reference to the hero's striving for earthly honour rather than heavenly glory. Heroism in poetry is based on excess: Beowulf's extraordinary strength and his superhuman deeds have nothing of moderation about them. This quality is found in all literature that makes little or no attempt at realism. Also Beowulf, like other pagan warriors, is concerned to win earthly honour, immortality in the memories of men and the songs of the scops. He tells Hrothgar, when the latter mourns over the death of Æschere at the hands of Grendel's mother:

> Ure āghwylc sceal ende gebīdan
> worolde lifes; wyrce sē þe mōte
> dōmes ær dēaþe; þæt bið drihtgumum
> unlifgendum æfter sēlest.
>
> (1386-1389)

> [Each of us shall await the end of life in this world, let him who can work before death for his fame; that is best for the warrior afterwards.]

For the same reason he is proud of having won the gold for his people, and of having had a long, peaceful, and prosperous reign. He goes to 'the doom of righteous men', not virtuous or holy men, and in the context of the poem nothing could be more appropriate.

Beowulf's summary of his own reign is primary evidence in judging what his view of the universe is.

> Ic ðās lēode hēold
> fīftig wintra; næs sē folccyning,
> ymbesittendra ænig ðāra,

þē mec gūðwinum grētan dorste,
egesan ðeon. Ic on earde bād
mǣlgesceafta, hēold mīn tela,
ne sōhte searonīðas, nē mē swōr fela
āða on unriht. Ic ðæs ealles mæg
feorhbennum sēoc, gefēan habban;
forðam mē wītan ne ðearf Waldend fīra
morðorbealo māga, þonne mīn sceaceð
līf of līce.

(2732b-2743a)

[I have ruled this people fifty winters; there has been no king among the neighbouring nations who has dared approach me with weapons, to threaten me with terror. I have awaited my appointed destiny in my own homeland, have held my own well; I have not sought strife, nor sworn oaths unrighteously. For all this, though sick with mortal wounds, I can rejoice; for the Ruler of men will have no cause to reproach me with murder of kin when my life departs from my body.][48]

The tone and contents of this passage indicate that Beowulf sees himself as a faithful vassal reporting to his lord the successful carrying out of an assigned task. Schücking quotes Heusler's summing up of the relation of the Germanic warrior to the powers ruling his life: "No terrified awareness of Deity, no humble submissiveness, but tones of comradely trust as between men and lords. . . . True pride, esteem for one's own achievement, dignity do not disappear in the religious relations.[49] Milton's definition of magnanimity comes to mind: "Magnanimity is shown, when in the seeking or avoiding, the acceptance or refusal of riches, advantages, or honours, we are actuated by a regard for

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[48] Brodeur, op. cit., p. 74 (translation quoted verbatim).

[49] Schücking, op. cit., p. 37.

our own dignity, rightly understood."[50] Beowulf accepted riches, advantages, and honours because he knew that he deserved them. In the case of the Geatish throne his acceptance was reluctant, but he was concerned about the safety of his people and there was no one else to rule them. He was proud of winning the dragon's gold because it was the just reward for a noble deed and, in fact, inadequate payment for the loss of his own life. Moreover, he thought his people would be able to use it well.

So he reports his mission accomplished; he looks back for a moment to his ancestors and kinsmen, mourning the fact that, with the exception of Wiglaf, he is the last of them:

> ealle wyrd forsweop
> mine mägas tō metodsceafte,
> eorlas on elne; ic him æfter scēal.
> (2814b-2816)
>
> [Fate swept all my kinsmen, nobles in their glory, to their destined end; I must go after them.]

These are his last words; there is no prayer for the salvation of his soul, only a trust that Wyrhten will recognize his earthly achievements.

Because the sense of law is so strong in an open-top universe, the hero of tragic literature is often shown as facing the consequences of an initial action, which is usually a breach of universal or natural law. In Beowulf

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[50] Milton, op. cit., p. 1019 (Bk. II, Chap. IX).

there is no such breach of law, but the hero is subject to the working out of a chain of events, causally related, which are the consequences of his position of leadership and his noble, courageous spirit. Given this initial fact and this starting position, the events of his life work themselves out according to the laws governing that kind of existence in that universe. Part of the greater weight of tragedy in the last third of the poem comes from the fact that the poet shows the tragic development "of narrowing a comparatively free life into a process of causation." [51] Once he is king of the Geats, he is bound to protect them; that is the initial fact and those are the rules of the game within which the hero is compelled to work out his own doom or salvation. He has no choice but to meet the dragon; his freedom of action is narrowed until there is no alternative but cowardice, and by a figure of heroic stature that possibility is never even considered.

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[51] Frye, op. cit., p. 212.

EPITHETS OF DEITY AND NUMBER OF OCCURRENCES

The following list of epithets is divided into two sections. The first contains epithets which are neutral in separating pagan from Christian elements in the poem and are used with reference to earthly rulers and warriors as often as divine rulers. The second contains terms which are translations or close equivalents of Latin terms for the Christian God and may not have been used with reference to a deity until after the Conversion of England. There are separate columns for occurrences in Part One and Part Two of the poem.

EPITHET	Part One	Part Two
God	20	3
Dryhten	12	2
Metod	11	1
Rædend	1	0
Frea	2	1
Helm	1	0
Wealdend	3	0
Demend	1	0
Hirde	1	0
Fæder	3	0
Scippend	1	0
Almihtig	1	0
Alwealda	3	0
Wuldorcyning	0	1
Sodcyning	0	1

IV

HEROISM AND THE HEROIC MOMENT

All the strands of significance that have been woven into a heroic poem meet at one point: the confrontation of the hero with his last opponent. In some poems this point is blurred or difficult to locate: of Roland's whole life, The Song of Roland presents only the battle of Roncevaux and the events immediately preceding it, so that the heroic moment looms disproportionally large. Siegfried, in The Nibelungenlied, never really comes face to face with his last opponent, because he is stabbed in the back without being given a chance to defend himself. But in these two poems, and in others like them, there is a point which corresponds, in the structure of the poem and in the emotional reactions of the reader, to the point of confrontation.

One of the most important qualities of the moment we are considering is that it marks the hero's realization this this opponent will be his last, that this battle will be to the death. Therefore, in The Song of Roland and in The Nibelungenlied the turning point is the one where the hero realizes that he is doomed, that the number of his

earthly days has been completed. Sifrid stoops to drink from the spring, and feels Hagen's spear in his heart. He leaps up and fells Hagen with his shield, but is unable to kill him because he does not have his weapons at hand, and his wound prevents him from doing his enemy any further harm.

> His colour drained away, and he could no longer stand. His body was robbed of all its strength, for the pallid hand of death was on his face. Before long he would be mourned by fair ladies everywhere.
>
> And the husband of Kriemhilde fell among the flowers. The blood flowed freely from his wound, and he began to curse, as he must, those who had treacherously plotted his death.
>
> . . .
>
> The flowers all round were drenched with blood. He struggled for his life, but not for long, for the weapons of death are always too keen. The brave and carefree knight could say no more. [1]

In The Song of Roland, I see the turning point as being the moment when Roland blows his horn, recognizing sure defeat, and then keeps fighting to the death.

In The Iliad, the emotional impact of the confrontation is increased because it is split. Hector remains outside the Scaean Gates after all the other Trojans are inside, protected from the Greeks' advance. Priam, Hecuba, and Andromache beg him to come in, but he has to face Achilles and pays no attention to them. He has been rash before in not retreating betimes to the city, and his folly caused the death of many Trojan warriors. Now he faces the reproach of one of his men if he returns to the city, and

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[1] The Nibelungenlied, pp. 93-94 (stanzas 987-988, 993).

reproach is the disgrace of the hero. He reflects:

> For me, 'twere better far
> Or from the ills, slain in open fight,
> Back to return in triumph, or myself
> To perish nobly in my country's cause. [2]

He ponders the possibility of making peace with the Greeks by returning Helen and other booty, but decides eventually to stand and meet Achilles.

But the arrival of the Greek champion, and his first spear throw, send Hector into a momentary panic, and he flees from Achilles. "Homer wanted him to be a whole man and spared him neither the quaking of terror nor the shame of cowardice." [3] Pallas, in the guise of Deiphobus, comes to offer Hector deceptive help, and, trusting her, he turns to face Achilles; the goddess, however, goes to the assistance of Achilles. When Hector realizes this, knowing that the gods have deceived him, he sees that he has come to his last battle:

> Now is my death at hand, nor far away:
> Escape is none; since so hath Jove decreed,
> And Jove's far-darting son, who heretofore
> Have been my guards; my fate hath found me now.
> Yet not without a struggle let me die,
> Nor all inglorious; but let some great act,
> Which future days may hear of, mark my fall. [4]

In Macbeth the moment is delineated with striking clarity. On the basis of the witches' second set of

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[2] The Iliad, XXII, 130-133.

[3] Bespaloff, op. cit., p. 42.

[4] The Iliad, XXII, 354-360.

prophecies he believes himself invincible until Birnham Wood come to Dunsinane and until he meets a man not born of woman. In the last act we see him first of all half shattered by the coming to pass of the first condition. When Macduff reveals that he "was from his mother's womb Untimely ripp'd" [5] Macbeth realizes that he has come face to face with the man who will kill him. The combination of despair at a glimpse of imminent death and a bravery all the more monumental for the admixture of despair characterizes many tragic heroes when they find themselves in a similar situation.

Gunnar, in Njal's Saga, hears his faithful watchdog give "a loud howl, the like of which none had ever heard before" [6] and realizes instantly that the dog must have been killed by lurking enemies. "It may well be fated that my turn is coming soon", [7] he reflects; he himself dies that same night after a valiant defense.

The Beowulf poet is very much aware of the importance of this point in his poem, and he handles it well. When Beowulf is first told of the dragon's ravages, he thinks that somehow he must have angered the eternal Ruler, Some

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[5] W. Shakespeare, "Macbeth", in Complete Works, ed. W. J. Craig (London: Oxford University Press, 1953), V, vii, 44-45.

[6] Njal's Saga, p. 168.

[7] Ibid., p. 169.

something which was against ancient law (2329-2331a). But there is no question in his mind concerning his duty; he orders a metal shield to be made for his protection against the dragon's flames, and decides to fight singlehanded, without the assistance of his dryht. His unusually gloomy mood (2332) is discussed in more detail later:

> Him wæs geōmor sefa,
> wæfre and wylfūs, wyrd ungemete nēah,
> sē ðone gomelan grētan sceolde,
> sēcean sāwle hord, sundur gedālan
> līf wið līce; nō þon lange wæs
> fēorh æþelinges flæsce bewunden.
> (2419b-2424)

> [His spirit was sad, restless and ready to depart; the fate immeasurably near which would greet the aged man, seek the treasure of his soul, part asunder life from body; not for long was the nobleman's spirit to be bound in flesh.]

He knows he is meeting his last opponent, and he knows that he will die soon: his soul is ready and eager to go, impatient at having to go through a long battle before being set free.

At this point, many of the topics and ideas discussed earlier in this paper come together. The dragon is the inhabitant and the personification of the wasteland, of chaos and its constant opposition to order and man's attempt to create a habitation for himself. Beowulf kills it, but somehow its spirit (which is perhaps but another name and another facet of the curse on the gold) lives on, and chaos and destruction overtake the Geats when their king is dead. The dragon is also related to the improper use of possessions; Beowulf, in this capacity, represents the proper use of possessions, the proper functioning of the dryht, and the

acceptance of treasure as a just reward for valorous deeds. He faces the dragon alone, two mighty opposites each defending his own vision of what is right: the dragon has cause for anger in that his hoard of treasure has been plundered, but the destruction of men and their homes with which he avenges that theft makes it necessary for Beowulf to defend his subjects.

Beowulf's social environment comes into the picture too at this point in the poem. His people are waiting anxiously for the outcome of the battle, on which their whole tribal destiny depends. His immediate followers, except Wiglaf, desert him, providing a second aspect of the malfunctioning of the dryht society. Between this one and the first aspect discussed, that of the dragon and his significance, Beowulf is caught in a narrowing passage that leads to defeat and death.

The point of final encounter is a particularly human moment; God has retreated to a vantage point from which he can observe what men do in their last hours; the hero's life draws to a close as the Fates had long ago determined that it should, and now the control of wyrd is suspended until the moment of death. That is why there is no divine assistance in the last battle, no sword that appears at the crucial moment: there is only the human assistance of Wiglaf, an inexperienced but noble youth who sees the significance and the humanness of that last battle. He does not appeal

to any deity for help; finding his companions unwilling he takes the duty on himself and performs it valorously.

The victory, in so far as it is one, is human. It cannot be said that it is a victory by men over the demonic powers, because the latter always win in the temporal context, and the dragon in effect defeats the whole nation of the Geats. But it is a human victory over fear in the face of the implacable decree of Fate. The strength of the human spirit triumphs over them, and triumphs over the death of the body, no matter what kind of immortality is anticipated.

Again the Christian and pagan elements meet here. The pagan warriors, with their belief in the invincible strength of human courage, made courage and heroism the highest qualities of the human soul. These qualities assured the warrior who had fallen in battle of a place in Valhalla, and gave him on earth an immortal existence in the songs of the scops and the memories of men. In this way death was conquered by the pagans, and defeat by the implacable powers was turned into a victory for the human spirit.

Although the story of Beowulf does not emphasize the brevity of human existence, it does emphatically concentrate on the mortal fate which conflicts with the glory of heroic achievement and yet is the basis for redemption. Beowulf is never wholly free from despair but he triumphs over it, and in this triumph the author successfully completes his theme of judgment after recounting the trials of his hero.[8]

Another way to look at the paradox of "victory through

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[8]Peter F. Fisher, op. cit., p. 171.

defeat" is to see the battle concerned as taking place in two contexts at once. On the most obvious level, the victory over the dragon merges with the defeat caused by the death of Beowulf himself and the final annihilation of the Geats. But beyond this cycle Beowulf goes to seek the judgment of righteous men; this, though not an assurance of his salvation, carries a connotation of immortality and places the hero in an eternal context. The eternal life of the soul is the victory over the defeat in time of the body and all other transient things.

This is made specific in Christianity where death is conquered in the resurrection of the soul; the idea of victory through defeat is taken out of the military context which is natural to a society whose most respected citizens are fighters and singers of heroic songs, and granted to anyone of pure spirit. Heroism became more than mere physical prowess and the courage of the warrior faced with a formidable opponent and became the courage of any man to live the good life as prescribed in the sacred scripture and its interpretations.

Christianity provided a model for both peaceful and warlike heroism--Christ. His nature, as revealed in the New Testament, was a peaceful one, and He preached peace in man's relations with his fellows. But in the battling of evil He was militant, and to medieval exegetes of the Bible this battle of good and evil was seen as the battle

of Christ and Satan. Frequently Satan took on a demonic form, usually that of a dragon or a leviathan, and naturally this fight became the prototype for all kinds of fictional contests.

The pattern for heroes of Christian literature, then, was Christ. He sacrificed himself for His people, and His death and resurrection added meaning to the ancient pagan idea of victory through defeat. Like Him, the hero comes from the "upper world" [9] or is distinguished by some special endowment; as we have seen, the strength of Beowulf and many other heroes is related to this. Both are saviors or redeemers of their people, and overtones of sacrifice in the hero's death are frequently found and structurally meaningful.

As Christ is man, redeemed man, and in a certain sense, mankind as a whole, so the fictional hero becomes mankind's representative in the great conflict of good against evil, light against dark, order against chaos. His opponents are the forces of evil, darkness, and destruction; they are assimilated to Satan just as the hero is assimilated to Christ. [10]

This process of assimilation, where universal and eternally recurrent ideas are identified with each

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[9] Frye, op. cit., p. 187.

[10] Ibid., p. 187.

particular set of opponents, therefore causing the pairs of opponents to be reminiscent of and related to each other, explains why Christian and pre-Christian heroes come to be identified and compared: they represent essentially the same set of ideas, and the combat of mankind represented by a hero made up of its best or characteristic qualities and the foes of mankind embodied in a villain or a monster occurs again and again in literature, from The Song of Roland and Beowulf to nineteenth-century novels and modern science fiction. Therefore the same criteria and categories can be applied over and over again, and in a sense the question of a literary work's ideological or theological bias is irrelevant. It is important to decide what the specific rules of the game are, but once that is done it is discovered that generally the same rules apply in every work of a given category. The conclusions which I have reached about the universe in which Beowulf exists and acts will be found to apply to other tragic universes as well, and the implications of what I have called "the heroic moment" can be generalized to apply to similar points in other literary compositions.

Essentially, the heroic moment involves a man facing death. Fate, or wyrd, or the gods, have decreed that this will be the moment of death, and the hero realizes it. In that instant, he sees that as a result of the immediate sequence of actions and events in which he is involved, he will die. The reader's emotional entanglement at this

point indicates that he is sharing the hero's dilemma. The gods withdraw to an immeasurably remote place to watch. The hero must face his fate alone, and his manner of meeting it is important. "Death, it is true, was not to be sought, but it was not to be avoided either, if by avoidance a man lessened his own stature."[11] It was his decision and the decree of the gods that brought it on; once Beowulf had decided to meet the dragon there was no turning back.

The moment of decision and the manner of meeting death, in the form of the last opponent, are important in both Christian and pagan heroic literature. Professor Gwyn Jones writes:

> There was a right way to act: the consequences might be dreadful, hateful; but the conduct was more important than the consequences. . . . In part, this is the familiar dilemma of the Germanic hero: he has a choice not between right and wrong, but between wrongs, and cannot renegue. In part, it is a saga reading of character and destiny: to see one's fate and embrace it, with this curious aesthetic appreciation of what one is doing--it was this that made one a saga personage, a person worthy to be told about.[12]

This was written with specific reference to Icelandic sagas, but the qualities that made a "saga personage" also made a Germanic hero, and eventually they made, with little variation, a protagonist of heroic literature written in a Christian context. Adam and Eve, when they walk out of

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[11] "Eirik the Red" and Other Icelandic Sagas, ed. Gwyn Jones (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. xiv.

[12] Ibid., p. xiii.

the end of Paradise Lost, have been made aware of their fate and have accepted it; they can not be made to die because they are also mankind, and the race is not finished yet.

Beowulf, like the Icelandic heroes whom Professor Jones discusses, is faced with a choice not between a right and a wrong course of action but between two alternatives, each of which is wrong. Wiglaf says after the king's death that he and others of the king's companions tried to dissuade him from fighting the dragon:

> Ne meahton wē gelǣran lēofne þēoden,
> rīces hyrde rǣd ænigne,
> þæt hē ne grētte goldweard þone,
> lēte hyne licgean, þǣr hē lange wæs,
> wīcum wunian oð woruldende.
> Hēold on hēahgesceap; hord ys gesċēawod,
> grimme gegongen; wæs þæt gifeðe tō swīð,
> þē ðone [þēodcyning] þyder ontyhte.
> (3079-3086)

> [We could not give our beloved lord, guardian of the kingdom, any advice, that he should not meet the warden of the goldhoard but let him lie where he had long been, inhabiting his dwelling until the end of the world. He held to his high destiny; the hoard has been viewed, grimly acquired; that fate was too cruel that sent the king of the people hither.]

But this is misleading as far as the heroic code of conduct went, because Beowulf had no choice. To refuse combat with the dragon would have been eternal disgrace, an unimaginable evil; therefore he had to choose to fight. As we have seen earlier, his decision to fight alone is perfectly consistent with his lifelong practice of meeting his opponents single-

handed and, if possible, with no weapons but his bare hands.

This limiting of choice is an indication that fate is moving in on him; he is aware of it, as his unusual mood of depression indicates. As the number of the hero's days draw to an end his freedom becomes limited.

A natural question to come up at this time concerns the amount of freedom of action and decision which are permitted to the hero in an open-top universe. It is related to a problem which has often caused literary critics some trouble, and which Professor Frye formulates in these terms:

> There are two reductive formulas which have often been used to explain tragedy. Neither is quite good enough, but each is almost good enough, and as they are contradictory, they must represent extreme or limiting views of tragedy. One of these is the theory that all tragedy exhibits the omnipotence of external fate. . . . The fatalistic reduction of tragedy does not distinguish tragedy from irony, and it is again significant that we speak of the irony of fate rather than of its tragedy. . . . It is the admixture of heroism that gives tragedy its characteristic splendour and exhilaration.
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> The other reductive theory of tragedy is that the act which sets the tragic process going must be primarily a violation of moral law, whether human or divine; in short, that Aristotle's hamartia or "flaw" must have an essential connection with sin or wrongdoing.[13]

As Professor Frye himself says, neither of these is quite adequate. Having explored the two antithetical formulas for the interpretation of tragic literature, he concludes that "tragedy . . . seems to elude the antithesis of moral responsibility and arbitrary fate, just as it eludes the

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[13] Frye, op. cit., pp. 209-210.

antithesis of good and evil." [14] He finds in Milton's Adam the archetypal tragic hero, and concludes from the study of Paradise Lost that "just as comedy often sets up an arbitrary law and then organizes the action to break or evade it, so tragedy presents the reverse theme of narrowing a comparatively free life into a process of causation." [15]

This conclusion can be seen to apply to Beowulf, where the hero is finally left with no honourable alternative but to fight the dragon, and therefore with no means of escaping his all-too-evident fate.

A work of tragic literature ends in one of various ways, on one of various cadences. The corpse-strewn stage at the end of Hamlet is known even to those who are not familiar with the play; the dramatically effective characters who are lying there are replaced by a group of pale mediocrities, both extreme good and extreme evil having been purged from Denmark.

Samson Agonistes ends with slaughter on an even larger scale. Like Beowulf, the hero is a redeemer figure, and pulls the roof down on Israel's traditional enemies, as well as on himself. The play ends with "calm of mind, all passion spent", [16] as the chorus finds in Samson's

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[14] Frye, op. cit., p. 211.

[15] Ibid., p. 212.

[16] Milton, Samson Agonistes, in op. cit., l. 1758.

deed a manifestion of divine will.

Willy Loman in _eath of a Salesman_ is also a sacrificial figure, dying, as he thinks, for the benefit and welfare of his family, especially of Biff. The tragic impact of the ending is enhanced by a strain of irony, in the different levels of "reality" and in the paradox of a house finally paid off with no one but Linda to live in it.

According to Professor Frye, the element of sacrifice is inescapable in the death of the tragic hero:

> Tragedy is a paradoxical combination of a fearful sense of rightness (the hero must fall) and a pitying sense of wrongness (it is too bad that he falls). There is a similar paradox in the two elements of sacrifice. One of these is communion, the dividing of a heroic or divine body among a group which brings them into unity with, and as, that body. The other is propitiation, the sense that in spite of the communion the body really belongs to another, a greater, and a potentially wrathful power. . . . As a mimesis of ritual, the tragic hero is not really killed or eaten, but the corresponding thing in art still takes place, a vision of death which draws the survivors into a new unity.[17]

From this comes a sense of communion and exaltation easily seen in the ending of _amson Agonistes_, of _eath of a Salesman_, of _ing Lear_, and even in the scene in _he Iliad_ where Priam and Achilles settle the disposition of Hector's body. Perhaps the ancient Greeks used the funeral games to express this sense of exaltation and communion.

As tragedy and tragic conclusions assume various cadences, so heroism can be seen from different angles. It is not absolutely necessary to see the hero as a redeemer

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[17] Frye, _op. cit._, pp. 214-215.

or a sacrificial figure, but often this provides an illuminating angle from which to study a work of fiction. But heroism has a lowest common denominator, which as I see it is a freedom of action and decision which seems quite real, and which is quite real, until it is seen as being involved in the framework of a universe, a society, and an accepted code of conduct which actually dictates what decision the hero will make and how his life will end. This is another way of looking at the limiting of freedom already noted. The final decision is an acceptance of one of several alternatives, all of them wrong and all with evil consequences; the hero chooses the one that produces the most benefit for his society, his tribe, or his family, and the most glory and honour for himself. Whether or not it involves a vision of redemption, there is always a sense of nobility and generosity inherent in the hero's death, and a feeling that human will and courage have triumphed over the forces of fate and death.

Kemp Malone sees the idea of sacrifice for the hero's people as a necessary quality of heroism. He writes of Beowulf:

> As the poem stands, the fate of the hero and the fate of the tribe are bound together in such a way that each lends weight and worth to the other. We mourn for the Geatas as well as for their king, and this double mourning deepens as well as widens the sweep of the tragic march of events. One cannot doubt that the poet meant it so. For him, Beowulf would not have been a hero if he had not had a people to die for.[18]

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[18] Kemp Malone, "Beowulf", in Nicholson, op. cit., p. 153.

This provides a kind of bridge between the idea of the hero as a redeemer with strong theological overtones and that of the hero as simply a leader of his people. The repercussions from the hero to his people and back again add volume and significance to the poem, and the hero's death for his people has a concreteness that a sacrifice for an ideal does not have.

In the heroic moment all the aspects of Beowulf's life and character merge. He is a man alone at that point; even in his last battle he chooses to fight alone, and a strain of irony is apparent in the fact that when he needs help most this law, this code of conduct which he has imposed on himself, recoils and finally leaves him desperately alone against his last opponent. The role of Wiglaf has been discussed already. It is true that Beowulf had ordered his men to keep out of the fight, claiming the dragon as his own opponent. But that is irrelevant in the present discussion. The logic of single combat, the code of heroic conduct, becomes part of the law which rules the universe of tragic literature. Here the logic of single combat works itself out to the death of the hero, just as the logic of revenge works itself out in so much Germanic literature, and especially in Icelandic sagas. In Beowulf's youth it favours him and he wins an extra measure of glory by it, but in the end it causes his death. It is one aspect of "that something beyond . . . which is [the heroes'] strength

and their fate alike." [19]

In a sense, it is also the logic of heroism which dooms any hero: he is committed to heroic actions and he obeys the heroic code until in the end he meets an opponent who is too powerful for him. Margaret Goldsmith talks about "the disastrous pride of the epic hero" [20] and finds in this Beowulf's downfall. She is convinced that the poet is indirectly preaching a Christian moral lesson, and that this lesson is directed against pride. "Beowulf's fatal pride is foreshadowed; it is treated as a sin which he must guard against when he comes to power." [21] She attributes the downfall of the Geats, like the destruction of Charlemagne's rear guard, to the stubborn pride of the heroes in the epics concerned.

Miss Goldsmith is right, I think, in seeing pride as one of the characteristics of the traditional epic hero, but wrong in condemning it and in assuming that the Beowulf poet condemns it. The standards of Christian humility and obedience do not apply to any protagonist of heroic literature, whether he is Christian or pagan. Roland may have shown disastrous pride in not blowing his horn sooner, but

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[19] Frye, op. cit., p. 208.

[20] Margaret E. Goldsmith, "The Christian Perspective in Beowulf", in Nicholson, op. cit., p. 377.

[21] Ibid., p. 377.

if he had done so sooner there would have been no epic and no hero and no heroism. The demands of the form must be kept in mind. It is worth recalling Heusler's words concerning the hero's "true pride, esteem for one's own achievement, dignity." [22]

Beowulf has every right to be proud of his achievements; I do not think that the poet condemns him for his justified pride. Moreover, because he is acting under a heroic code of conduct, he is subject to the laws governing heroic actions: most of all, he is subject to the logic of heroism discussed above. The demands of this kind of poetry have to be considered, and no poem about Beowulf would ever have been written if the hero had not obeyed the laws of heroic conduct and died gloriously. In short, to condemn the pride of the epic hero is to condemn his heroism itself and to nullify his reason for existing in a work of literature.

But there are other aspects of the hero's character besides pride, particularly when Christian influence makes itself felt. Whether or not the poem conveys a strong sense of the hero's sacrifice, there is always a social context in which he functions, and his courage and lavish expenditure of his own possessions, energy, and even his life conveys a sense of generosity. In Beowulf and other

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[22] Quoted by Schücking, in Nicholson, op. cit., p. 37.

literature which has its foundation generally in heroic Age Germania the generous giving of possessions is an important part of social life; it is, in fact, the very life-blood of the society. Hrothgar is a supremely generous monarch, and so is Hygelac, if we can judge by the poverty which compelled him to raid the Frisians. Beowulf, too, according to the testimony of Wiglaf, is generous to his retainers. He seems to do everything on an extravagant scale, and his penchant for single combat is part of it. But this, too, recoils on him: the code of conduct established when he was young and exuberant and insuperably strong, the glory of his youth, becomes the bane of his old age. The heroic logic works itself out to his destruction. But the generosity is still there; at the last he can be generous with his life.

R. W. Chambers writes of Beowulf: "He faced the unknown powers of darkness and evil, and that is the proof of his magnanimity, his grandeur and his courage. The horror of the place is the measure of his heroism."[23] While it is a debatable point whether or not heroism can be measured by the odds it faces, at least in a simple progression, it is true that the original audiences of Beowulf would consider the odds increased by the fact that

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[23] R. W. Chambers, Beowulf, An Introduction to the Study of Old English Poetry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1927), p. 21.

Beowulf had to meet Grendel's mother and the dragon on their own territories, in the desert surroundings so appropriate to the spirits of the wasteland and the forces of destruction and chaos. The hero's courage would have to face not only physical but spiritual opposition as well.

"A last point to be made about what I have called "the heroic moment" is that there is a sense of waiting, a universal hush of suspense while the hero works out his destiny. The gods have chosen their champion and the devils theirs, and the combat between these two has wide-ranging repercussions of significance. In this sense Beowulf and other epics share with tragic drama the quality of universal involvement in the affairs of men. As we have seen, Venus is so concerned about the welfare of Paris that she carries him away from the single combat with Menelaus. The second battle in The Song of Roland is even more obviously of cosmic proportions than the first. In Arnold's Sohrab and Rustum the universe frowns on the unnatural battle between a father and son who are unknown to each other, and expresses its disapproval in a disturbance in nature resembling similar phenomena in Macbeth and Julius Caesar:

> And you would say that sun and stars took part
> In that unnatural conflict; for a cloud
> Grew suddenly in heaven, and dark'd the sun
> Over the fighters' heads; and a wind rose
> Under their feet, and horsing swept the plain,
> And in a sandy whirlwind wrapp'd the pair. [24]

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[24] Matthew Arnold, Poetical Works, ed. C. B. Tinker and H. F. Lowry (London: Oxford University Press, 1950), ll. 480-485.

Beowulf, having entrusted himself to *wyrd* . . . *Metod manna gehwæs* 'Fate . . . the ruler of every man' (2526b-2527a), goes into the battle with the dragon; his men, according to instructions, wait at a safe distance, and the rest of the people wait in the town. *Wyrd* stands by to decide the battle.

The outcome has been forecast long ago; the pattern established for heroic poetry leaves room for as little free will on the poet's part as the hero finds in his fate-dominated universe. But fame among men is possible; the poem itself is a monument, and within the poem the barrow on the cliff will serve to remind seafarers, the restless ones of the earth, of the hero's life and death.

V

THE HERO AND THE POET

It will have become evident from the foregoing chapter that, as I see it, the nature, conduct, and achievements of the hero of a work of literature are shaped not by a specific and theologically sound universe, nor by a society and social conventions that faithfully represent those which existed at a particular time and place, nor even by the demands of making him as much as possible like the people we know. Everything in the literary composition, including the gods which rule its universe, the nature and code of conduct of the hero, the society he lives in and his relationship to it, the opposition he faces, is determined by the kind of literary work in which he appears. The fictional society may have a recognizable bearing on a kind of human society which existed somewhere at some time, but that particular fictional society exists only in the work of literature which depicts it.

Because of this, the question of form arises with reference to Beowulf. By this I do not mean that I intend to prove or disprove statements that Beowulf is or is not an epic, or a heroic elegy, or a lay, although there are

elements of all these in it. H. V. South discusses the epic in these terms:

> If the story is a true epic, its form and substance will vary according to the spiritual problem of the age. It is in the victory over human weakness, and in the assertion of human confidence, that the epic preserves its consistency to type. [1]

And E. M. W. Tillyard deduces, from a study of epic and heroic narratives, that "the true epic will assume a form which answers the most serious concerns of any age." [2] This leaves very little of the standard definition of an epic as "a long narrative poem on a serious subject, related in an elevated style, and centered about an heroic figure on whose actions depends to some degree the fate of a nation or a race." [3]

Throughout this study I have been classing Beowulf with "heroic literature" in order to keep the prominence of the hero in mind. Also the term is general enough so that while giving the poem a "handle" it also kept the question of the poem's specific genre in abeyance until it could be seen as a whole, other important facets having been discussed, and everything finally drawn back into the boundaries of the poetic structure itself. I do not

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[1] H. V. South, op. cit., II, 129.

[2] E. M. W. Tillyard, The English Renaissance: Fact or Fiction? (London: Logarth Press, 1952), p. 88.

[3] M. H. Abrams, A Glossary of Literary Terms (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1957), p. 29.

want to attach a specific label to the poem even now, but it is important to study its qualities and the conventions which the form imposes on the contents.

In Chapter One I classified Beowulf as a hero of romance, and discussed Professor Frye's definition with specific reference to him. And as Beowulf is the typical "romantic" hero, so the poem has basically a "romantic" structure, with the quest pattern as an organizing principle. The quest is, of course, two-fold, one part dealing with the hero's adventures in Denmark and the second with his defense of his own people against the dragon. But both sections depict him fighting monsters, and in order to see the two parts as forming one coherent quest or series of adventures it is only necessary to abstract both parts into the more universal pattern of significance which sees in the hero's battles the combat of man against non-human opponents, of light against darkness or good against evil.

Northrop Frye summarizes the "central form of the quest-romance" in this way:

> A land ruled by a helpless old king is laid waste by a sea-monster, to whom one young person after another is offered to be devoured, until the lot falls on the king's daughter: at that point the hero arrives, kills the dragon, marries the daughter, and succeeds to the kingdom.[4]

Part One of Beowulf does not correspond to this in every detail, but the resemblance is closer than at first seems

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[4] Frye, op. cit., p. 186.

apparent. Hrothgar is certainly helpless against the ravages of Grendel, and numerous members of his dryht are slain and eaten by the monster. It is true that Freawaru, Hrothgar's daughter, seems to be in no immediate danger, and that the hero neither marries her nor succeeds to the Kingdom, but the poet does repeatedly insist on Hrothgar's adoption of Beowulf as a son, apparently in an honorary status only. This could be slightly puzzling in itself, unless we consider it merely a formal compliment, and recognize that it is a perfectly proper thing for Hrothgar to do, as the pattern indicates. The structure of the poem so far is comedic as far as Beowulf himself is concerned; he has saved the Danes from Grendel and his mother, and it is not his fault that internal political dissension and renewal of the Heathobardan feud will after all bring about the death and destruction that he thought he had averted.

This part of the poem is predominantly cheerful on the surface, but there is an undertone of sombre melancholy whenever the future downfall of the Danes is hinted at. The poet skillfully combines this motif with the heavy tread of Grendel,[5] so that Grendel represents the permanent threat to Danish prosperity and unity, somewhat as

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[5]Please see above, p. 14, for a more detailed discussion of this.

Unferth does.[6] Beowulf defeats Grendel and puts Unferth in his place, but the spirit of anarchy and chaos which is embodied in them survives and has its day later on. The same thing appears in the second part of the poem, where the curse on the gold is first embodied in the dragon and after the dragon's death continues acting until it brings the Geats to their destruction.

If Professor Frye is right in finding the above-quoted summary to be the basic structure of most "romantic" works of literature, then the first part of Beowulf certainly belongs with them. But the quoted outline does not fit the second part nearly so well. For one thing, the standard plot of romance ends happily, as Beowulf does not. Even the first part, taken by itself, has an undercurrent of tragedy which complicates the simple romance structure.

In the previous chapter, many of the critical terms and statements which I used with reference to the poem and its hero were those which Professor Frye uses of high mimetic tragedy, the drama found in Classical Greece and Elizabethan England. Beowulf, obviously of superhuman strength in Part One, becomes in Part Two an old man, still strong but not invincible. The overtones of divinity which he had in Part One, owing to his strength and his saviour-

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[6] Unferth has been seen as "more than a foil for the hero, since he (or his presence alone) becomes symptomatic of dissension and sedition." J. L. Rosier, "Design for Treachery: The Unferth Intrigue", PMLA LXXVII (1962), p. 4.

like mission to Denmark, are submerged in the second part under the tragic fate awaiting him. Here he fits more closely in the category of the hero of high mimetic tragedy, described by Professor Frye as "superior in degree to other men but not to his natural environment. He has authority, passions, and powers of expression far greater than ours, but what he does is subject both to social criticism and the order of nature." [7]

In Chapter One of this study I quoted Professor Frye's description of the hero of romance literature. One point in that passage requires reexamination now. We are told that "the hero of romance moves in a world in which the ordinary laws of nature are slightly suspended." [8] As we saw in the previous chapter, in Part One of the poem miracles are still possible, indicating that in fact the laws of nature are slightly suspended. But in Part Two the logic of destiny takes over, and the laws of the universe, or nature, or simply of tragic poetry close in. Beowulf is no longer superior to his natural environment: his invulnerability is at an end, [9] and when his own sword breaks on the dragon's hide there is only that of

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[7] Frye, op. cit., pp. 33-34.

[8] Ibid., p. 33.

[9] This invulnerability is never stressed in Part One, but neither is there ever any mention of wounds which he receives. The one possibly dubious phrase is fāh from fēondum 'bloodstained from enemies' (430a) which I take to mean that he was stained by enemy blood.

Wiglaf to help him. Also his social environment becomes more important. In Denmark he was a stranger, and although he is concerned about the fate of the Danes, he would not be directly affected by it. In Part Two he is defending his own people; they are waiting to hear the outcome of the battle on which their destiny depends. Wiglaf can criticize him for not having heeded the advice of his councillors to leave the dragon alone: this can be seen as the social criticism to which the tragic hero is subject. In romance, Professor Frye says, "the hero's death or isolation . . . has the effect of a spirit passing out of nature, and evokes a mood best described as elegiac." [10] But the ending of Beowulf strikes us much more strongly as describing the passing of a spirit out of a tribal society, the death of "a man who would be missed in the day when the enemies of the Gauts come upon them." [11]

"The elegiac presents a heroism unspoiled by irony" [12] and this brings us to the second part of the previous quotation from Northrop Frye. There is a considerable amount of irony in the ending of Beowulf, some of which has been discussed in the previous chapter. Beowulf vanquishes the dragon, the immediate enemy of his people, only to leave

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[10] Frye, op. cit., p. 36.

[11] W. P. Ker, Epic and Romance, p. 175.

[12] Frye, op. cit., p. 36.

them open, by his own death, to the attacks of their human enemies. There is also irony in the actions of the logic of heroism, which turns the tables on Beowulf and transforms the source of his youthful glory into final defeat and death. "The tragic hero has to be of a properly heroic size, but his fall is involved both with a sense of his relation to society and with a sense of the supremacy of natural law, both of which are ironic in reference." [13] And this seems to fit the hero of Part Two much more comfortably. But as well as irony there is also a strain of elegy present, "a diffused, resigned, melancholy sense of the passing of time, of the old order changing and yielding to a new one." [14] As we have seen, the purely elegiac should not be mixed with irony. In Beowulf it is; the all-too-humanness of the hero is made quite evident, and the imminent defeat of the Geats deepens the tragedy.

It must not, however, be concluded that tragedy and romance are antithetical and mutually exclusive. One way of classifying Beowulf, in fact, is to term it "tragic romance"; tragic in structure, meaning that it is what jazz aficionados would call "down beat", and romance in mode, indicating that generally it belongs with the "romantic" literature of the middle ages which includes everything

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[13] Frye, op. cit., p. 37.

[14] Ibid., pp. 36-37.

from Malory to hagiography. And yet in Part Two of the poem the tragedy becomes dominant, with the undercurrent from Part One adding to it and causing the reader or audience to reflect on the futility of human effort and other irony-laden subjects. Moreover, as we have seen, Beowulf as the old king fits more comfortably with the heroes of high mimetic tragic drama than with the semi-divine heroes of romance.

When one stands far enough back from the poem, one sees the first part as being predominantly "romantic" in mood and structure, and the second part deepening into tragedy. The same difference is to be noted in, for instance, The Nibelungenlied, where the domination of Siegfried and Brünnhilde over the first part makes its structure and mood "romantic", with magic swords and cloaks, compulsory feats of valour before the lady can be won, Siegfried's victory over the dragon and his near-invulnerability as a result of having bathed in the dragon's blood. The curse on the gold of the Nibelungs, a typical romance motif in the first part, becomes a social, economic, and psychological fact in the second part of the poem as it works itself out to the destruction of the Burgundians and of most of Etzel's men and allies.

By contrast, The Song of Roland presents this pattern in reverse. The first part, up to and including Roland's death, is fundamentally tragic; the hero fights

against superior odds and dies after having accomplished deeds of prodigious valour. His death is, however, vindicated and avenged, and seen as a victory in the wider context of the Christianity-Islam conflict in which the second battle takes place. It is in this second battle that the romance elements show up more strongly, with such motifs as Charlemagne's supernuman age of "two hundred years and more" [15] and the delay of sunset in answer to Charlemagne's prayer [16] marking the tendency towards universalising and idealizing that one finds in romance literature.

One of the ablest Beowulf scholars of the past was Karl Müllenhoff, who was the chief exponent of what was called the "mythological theory" for interpreting the poem. Since this theory held an important place in Beowulf criticism for three-quarters of a century, it is worth some attention. R. W. Chambers summarizes its three propositions:

> (a) That some, or all, of the supernatural stories told of Beowulf the Geat, son of Ecgtheow (especially the Grendel-struggle and the dragon-struggle), were originally told of Beowulf the Dane, son of Scyld, who can be identified with the Beow or Beaw of the genealogies.
> (b) That this Beow was an ancient "god of agriculture and fertility".
> (c) That therefore we can allegorize Grendel and the dragon into culture-myths connected with the "god Beow." [17]

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[15] The Song of Roland, p. 71 (l. 924).

[16] Ibid., p. 145 (ll. 2458-2459).

[17] R. W. Chambers, op. cit., pp. 291-292.

Elsewhere Professor Chambers gives in more detail the argument of Müllenhoff and other "mythological" critics:

> Beaw is the divine helper of man in his struggle with the elements. Grendel represents the stormy north sea of early spring, flooding and destroying habitations of men, till the god rescues them. Grendel's mother represents the depths of the ocean. But in the autumn the power of the god wanes: the dragon personifies the coming of the wild weather: the god sinks in the final struggle to safeguard the treasures of the earth for his people. [Other critics], remembering that Grendel dwells in the fen, see in him rather a demon of the sea-marsh than of the sea itself; he is the pestilential swamp, and the hero a wind which drives him away. . . . Others, whilst hardly ranking Beowulf as a god, still see an allegory in his adventures, and Grendel must be a personification either of an inundation, or of the terror of the long winter nights, or possibly of grinding at the mill, the work of an enslaved foe.[18]

Chambers argues against "mythological" theories such as these on the grounds that "the nature-myth of Beow, which was called in to explain the origin of the Beowulf story as we have it, was itself only an assumption, a conjectural reconstruction."[19]

Müllenhoff is considered a villain by modern critics for another theory which is now unpopular: he was one of those who dissected the poem to find the different lays of which it was composed and the number of redactors and interpolators who had a hand in its construction. I admit that I cannot agree with this theory, but the former one can very nearly stand alone. But it must be proved or disproved by evidence from other works of the human imagination, rather

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[18] R. W. Chambers, op. cit., pp. 291-292.

[19] Ibid., p. 47.

than exclusively from etymologies and genealogies. Actually Müllenhoff was headed for the right goal (or at least for one of the goals which would be acceptable to present-day critics) but he was following the wrong track. Despite his belief in the essential disunity of the poem, however, he treated it as poetry, which the critics who mined it for historical information about tribal movements and pagan burial customs did not do.

Müllenhoff would have been met, somewhere near his goal, by Mircea Eliade, provided the latter had discussed Beowulf specifically. In Chapter One of this study I have applied Eliade's principles to the poem and, I hope, cast some light on it. Certainly the opposition of order and chaos is helpful in studying the contrast of Heorot and the mere, and of Beowulf and Grendel. Whether or not we agree with Müllenhoff's identification of Beowulf with the fertility god Beaw, it is quite evident that the hero of the poem is a helper, not strictly divine but certainly with superhuman qualities, of man against the forces that oppose him, which bring his efforts to naught and eventually destroy the little oases of order in the haunted wilderness. After all, the identification of the monsters with "the elements" depends on the identification of Beowulf with the fertility god, and we need not accept that in its entirety in order to give Müllenhoff his due. The common element in the work of Müllenhoff and modern critics is that Beowulf fights

for the human values of order, courage, and nobility against the non-human forces of chaos, destruction, and spiritual defeat.

As Professor Chambers says, it does not really matter whether Grendel and his mother "represent the tempest, or the malaria, or the drear long winter nights." [20] The important thing is that they are seen as forces opposing mankind, and obviously related to the nordic giants who are victorious over the men and the gods in the battle of Ragnarök. The powers of the gods wane and the forces of darkness triumph. That this ancient motif should be found along with the "Christian coloring" in Beowulf need not cause surprise: it is one of the patterns and ideas basic to tragic literature with a modicum of irony in the ending, and is found in literature written much later and under much more Christian skies. Part of the force of a tragic ending frequently comes from the audience's sense that the stronger one of two opponents has been defeated by the weaker one. This paradox--"the weakness of the strong and the persistent tensility of the weak" [21]--contributes to both the tragedy and the irony of a work of literature. It was well enough understood by W. B. Yeats, whose Red Man choose Cuchulain as the champion:

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[20] Chambers, op. cit., p. 47.

[21] From a book review in Time (Canada edition), Vol. LXXXIV, No. 4 (July 24, 1964), p. [illegible].

I choose the laughing lip
That shall not turn from laughing, whatever rise
or fall;
The heart that grows no bitterer although betrayed
by all;
The hand that loves to scatter; the life like a
gambler's throw;
And these things I make prosper, till a day come
that I know,
When heart and mind shall darken that the weak may
end the strong,
And the long-remembering harpers have matter for
their song. [22]

One of the best statements of this idea is, of course, to be found in Othello, where the weakness of the hero's nobility is, to the ironic eye, the inevitable prey for the villain's malicious and unscrupulous attacks.

There is something of this in Beowulf as well; it is part of the strain of irony in the last part of the poem, where the hero, in his youth invincible by even the most powerful and demonic monsters, falls under the attack of the dragon. The poet plays it down to some extent--too much irony would spoil the elegiac element in the poem's ending--and makes the dragon a formidable and almost heroic opponent, who does not use Iago's underhanded methods and who himself dies in the end. But in the hero's defeat by a non-human opponent there is something of the weak defeating the strong; brute strength is victorious over human nobility, evil over good, and the fact that the hero is on the defensive, almost at bay, helps drive the

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[22] W. B. Yeats, "The Green Helmet", op. cit., p. 243.

idea home.

It is characteristic of the complexity of the poem that the ending contains a combination of elegy and irony. The elegy is there in the "diffused, resigned, melancholy sense of the passing of time, of the old order changing and yielding to a new one."[23] In fact, Professor Frye, to illustrate his point, refers specifically to "Beowulf looking, while he is dying, at the great stone monuments of the eras of history that vanished before him."[24] Elegy laments the departure, destruction, or perversion of something desirable; the audience mourns over the death of Beowulf, recognising in this specific literary incident a symbol of the transitoriness of human existence and the futility of human endeavour on earth; this theme is supported and repeated in many different keys by other motifs in the story such as the ancient monuments and tarnished treasure surrounding Beowulf as he dies, the certainty of annihilation for the Geats in the forthcoming conflicts with enemy tribes, the cowardice of Beowulf's dryht in spite of all his generosity to them. Also the poem's unity becomes more clearly felt here, as tragic motifs, partly or completely submerged in Part One, come into the open here and fuse with the tragic woe of Part Two. The internal

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[23] Frye, op. cit., pp. 36-37.

[24] Ibid., p. 37.

strife and anarchy which was to destroy the Danes joins the fate of the Geats; Beowulf sought in vain to avert both of them. Killing the non-human enemies of these tribes did not do away with their human ones, or with the evil tendencies within the tribe itself and in the heart of man. The dragon's destruction of Beowulf's hall by fire recalls the fate that Heorot was to suffer. The prosperity and contentment at both courts was disrupted by the raiding of a non-human foe, whom Beowulf tackled singlehanded.

It becomes evident that it is impossible to separate the elegiac from the ironic. That is because we are in an increasingly tragic rather than a purely "romantic" context:

> Tragedy in the central or high mimetic sense, the fiction of the fall of a leader . . . mingles the heroic with the ironic. In elegiac romance the hero's mortality is primarily a natural fact, the sign of his humanity; in high mimetic tragedy it is also a social and moral fact. The tragic hero has to be of a properly heroic size, but his fall is involved both with a sense of his relation to his society and with a sense of the supremacy of natural law, both of which are ironic in reference.[25]

This is where Part Two of Beowulf belongs. The hero's social context becomes more strongly felt in tragedy than in romance, and Beowulf in Part One is little more than a redeemer who comes to the assistance of the Danes from outside, while in Part Two he is more definitely involved with the people he protects: they are his own subjects, and

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[25] Frye, op. cit., p. 37.

they give him a tribal background and a social setting which he does not have in Part One. In Part Two he is still alone, but it is the aloneness of Othello or Macbeth, political leaders in a definite social context, rather than that of one of Malory's or Spenser's questing heroes in an idyllic and undefined social environment.

The central point in the structure of a heroic poem such as Beowulf remains the character and actions of the hero. One reason for this is that the structure of romance literature is based on the quest pattern, "a sequence of minor adventures leading up to a major or climacteric adventure." [26] These literary quests are usually undertaken by one man who is alone. Those which make up The Faerie Queene are among the clearest examples, and Malory provides others. The same structure is found in picaresque novels, and the story of a peripatetic hero travelling along a road or other communications route, like the river in Huckleberry Finn, is familiar and often lengthy.

At its worst, a literary work of this kind deals with unrelated adventures; soap operas and comic strips are often debased versions of the same structure. But in the hands of better writers the adventures are thematically related; even the maturing process which the hero, who like the Perceval of Chrétien de Troyes is often of astounding

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[26] Frye, op. cit., pp. 186-187.

innocence and ignorance at the beginning, provides a development which ties the incidents together.

In Beowulf the chronological sequence of events is sacrificed to the thematic interest to such a degree that it is impossible to reconstruct the hero's life in great detail except for the three main adventures. But chronological development did not seem to interest the poet, and as a result the quest pattern is somewhat obscured. The gigantic figure of the hero and his aloneness are the main aspects of the poem that associate it with the quest of more typical romance literature.

What, then, is the thematic interest for which the simpler pattern is abandoned? As I see it, it is to be found in the character and nature of the hero himself.

> The character and personage of Beowulf must be brought out and impressed on the audience; it is the poet's hero that they are bound to admire. He appeals to them, not directly, but with unmistakable force and emphasis, to say that they have beheld the nature of the hero, and to give him their praises.[27]

This was written many years ago by W. P. Ker, who did not really have much admiration for the plot and foreground events of the poem as a whole,[28] and yet could recognize

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[27] W. P. Ker, Epic and Romance, p. 173.

[28] "The plot in itself has no very great poetical value . . . . In the killing of a monster like Grendel, or in the killing of a dragon, there is nothing particularly interesting; no complication to make a fit subject for epic. Beowulf is defective from the first in respect of plot." Ibid., p. 169.

in the hero a stature and a nobility of nature that ranked him with other epic heroes and with the protagonists of Icelandic saga and tragic drama.

The Beowulf poet brings us face to face with heroic man, with a vision of what man can be if his potential best is unalloyed with baser metal. Beowulf has more recognizably human qualities than the hero of romance (one of Spenser's knights, for instance) and, generally speaking, stands in more complete isolation from social and political involvements than heroes of tragic drama such as Macbeth or Oedipus. As we saw in Chapter One of this study, it is incorrect to look for complete correspondence between Beowulf and ordinary, or even extraordinarily virtuous or courageous, human beings. But the figure of the hero and the total vision represented by the poem are related to the lives of men in the poet's "exhibition of human motives and [his] implied or expressed opinions about human conduct." [29]

Critics have made every attempt to find a central theme, an underlying and all-embracing unity in the poem. Peter Fisher finds it "in the theme of redemption and judgment treated in a way which skillfully blends the Germanic hero with the Christian saint." [30] Marie Padgett Hamilton finds it in "the singleness and consistency of

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[29] J. D. Bruce, Medieval English Literature, p. 24.

[30] Peter Fisher, op. cit., p. 171.

the figure of the hero, his nature and his achievements. The much disputed unity of the poem rests chiefly on the fact that his presence ties the two halves together; in so far as thematic and structural unity exists, it is involved with the hero's character and deeds. This does not mean that it is only his presence which holds it together: it is the ideas which cluster around him and which are embodied in him, the ideals and values which he represents. This complex of ideas and ideals I have attempted to explore in the present study.

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[31] Marie Padgett Hamilton, "The Religious Principle in Beowulf", in Nicholson, op. cit., p. 13[illegible].

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