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E. TALBOT DONALDSON

[Overview of The Poem]

Beowulf, the oldest of the great long poems written in English, was probably composed more than twelve hundred years ago, in the first half of the eighth century. Its author may have been a native of what was then West Mercia, the West Midlands of England today, though the late tenth-century manuscript, which alone preserves the poem, originated in the south in the Kingdom of the West Saxons. In 1731, before any modern transcription of the text had been made, the manuscript was seriously damaged in the fire that destroyed the building in London which housed the extraordinary collection of medieval English manuscripts made by Sir Robert Bruce Cotton (1571–1631). As a result of the fire and of subsequent deterioration of the manuscript, a number of lines and words have been lost from the poem, but even if the manuscript had not been damaged, the poem would still have been difficult, because the poetic Old English (or Anglo-Saxon) in which it was written is itself harsh, the style is allusive, the ideas often seem remote and strange to modern perceptions, and because the text was inevitably corrupted during the many transcriptions which must have intervened in the two and a half centuries between the poem’s composition and the copying of the extant manuscript. Yet despite its difficulty, the somber grandeur of Beowulf is still capable of wringing the hearts of readers, and because of its excellence as well as its antiquity, the poem merits the high position that it is generally assigned in the study of English poetry.

While the poem itself is English in language and origin, it deals not with native Englishmen, but with their Germanic forbears, especially with two south-Slavonic tribes, the Danes and the Geats, who lived on the Danish island of Zealand and in southwest Sweden, respectively. Thus, the historical period it concerns—though as it may be said to refer to history at all—is some two centuries before the poem was written, that is, it concerns a time following the initial invasion of England by Germanic tribes in 449, but before the Anglo-Saxon migration was completed, and perhaps before the arrival of the ancestors of the audience to whom the poem was sung; this audience may have considered itself to be of the same Geatsch stock as the hero, Beowulf. The one divisible fact of history mentioned in the poem is a raid on the

Frank made by Hyperia, the king of the Goths at the time Beowulf was a young man, and this raid occurred in the year 520. Yet despite their antiquity, the poet's materials must have been very much alive to his audience, for theophilanthropic projects in which he alludes to events not directly concerned with his plot demands of the listener a wide knowledge of traditional Germanic history. This knowledge was probably kept alive by other heroic poetry, of which little has been preserved in English, though much must once have existed. As it stands, Beowulf is not only unique as an example of the Old English epic, but is also the greatest of the surviving epics composed by the Germanic peoples.

It is generally agreed that the poet who put the old materials into their present form was Christian, and that his poems reflect a Christian tradition: the conversion of the Germanic settlers in England had been completed during the century preceding the one in which the poet wrote. But there is little general agreement as to how clearly Beowulf reflects a Christian tradition or, conversely, the actual nature of the Christian tradition that it is held to reflect. Many specifically Christian references occur, especially in the Old Testament: God is said to be the Creator of all things and His will seems recognized (specifically if not systematically) as being identical with Fate (yrth); Grendel is described as a descendant of Cain, and the sword that Beowulf finds in Grendel's mother's lair has emerged on it the story of the reptiles and their destruction by flood; the dead await God's judgment, and Hell and the Devil are ready to receive the soul of Grendel and his mother, while believers will find the Father's embrace; Hrothgar's speech at advice to Beowulf (section XXV) seems to reflect the patriarchal doctrine in its emphasis on conscience and the Devil's urging as a sort of innkeeper. Yet there is no reference to the New Testament—to Christ and His Sacrifice which are the sources of Christianity in any intelligible sense of the term. Furthermore, readers may well feel that the poem achieves rather little of its emotional power through invocation of the stories, values or values of values that are consistent with Christian doctrine as we know it. Perhaps the sex of tragic waste which pervades the Finnang episode (section XVII) brings forth a Christian notion of the innate liability of the primitive Germanic战士 for vengeance; and the fact that Beowulf's chief adversaries are not men but monsters that before his death he is able to bring down by his fighting of the Goths he did not seek wars with neighboring tribes may reflect a Christian's appreciation for peace among men. But while admitting such values, the poet also involves many others of a very different order, values that seem to belong to an ancient, pagan, warrior society of the kind described by the Roman historian Tacitus at the end of the first century. It should be noted that even Hrothgar's speech about conscience is directed more toward making Beowulf a good Germanic leader of men than a good Christian. One must, indeed, draw the conclusion from the poem itself that while Christian is a correct term for the religion of the poet and of his audience, it was a Christianity that had not yet by any means succeeded in obliterating an older pagan tradition, which still called forth powerful responses from men's hearts, despite the fact that many aspects of this tradition must be alien to a sophisticated Christian. In this connection it is well to recall that the missionaries from Rome who initiated the conversion of the English proceeded in a less systematic manner, not as much supporting paganism in order to plant Christianity as planting Christian beliefs in the faith that it would ultimately displace the gods of paganism. And the English clung long to some of their ancient traditions: for instance, the legal privilege of the payment of wergild (defined below) remained in force until the Norman Conquest, four centuries after the conversion of the English.

In the warrior society, whose values the poet constantly invokes, the most important of human relationships was that which existed between the warrior—the man—and his horse, a relationship loved less as adornment of one man's will to another's than on mutual trust and respect. When a warrior vowed loyalty to his lord, he became not so much his servant as his voluntary companion, one who would take pride in defending him and fighting in his war. In return, the lord was expected to take excellent care of his horse and to reward him richly for their valor: a good king, one like Hrothgar or Beowulf, is referred to by such poetic epithets as "protector of warhorses" and "dispenser of treasure" or "ring-giver," and the failure of kings is ascribed to their ill-treatment of or trangressions, both of which alienate them from their retainers. The material benefit of this arrangement between lord and thane is obvious, yet under a good king the relationship seems to have had a significance more spiritual than material. For the treasure that an ideal Germanic king wins from his enemies and rewards his retainers with is regarded as something more than mere wealth that will serve the well-being of its possessor; rather, it is a kind of visible proof that all parties are risking themselves to the full in a spiritual sense—the men of this land are courageously and successfully united with one another. The symbolic importance of treasure is illustrated by the poet's remark that the gift Beowulf gave the Danish east-guard brought the latter honor among his companions, and even more by the fact that although Beowulf
dies while obtaining a great treasure for his people, such objects as are removed from the dragon's hoard are actually buried with him as a fitting sign of his ultimate achievement. The relationship between kinsmen was also of deep significance to this society and provides another emotional value for Old English heroic poetry. If one of his kinsmen had been slain, a man had the special duty of either killing the slayer or exacting from him the payment of wergeld ("man-price"); each rank of society was evaluated at a definite price, which had to be paid to the dead man's kinsmen by the killer who wished to avoid their vengeance—even if the killing had been accidental. Again, the money itself had less significance as wealth than as a proof that the kinsmen had done what was right. Relatives who failed either to exact wergild or to take vengeance could never be happy, having found no practical way of satisfying their grief for their kinsman's death. "It is better for a man to avenge his friend than much money," Beowulf says to the old Hrothgar, who is bewailing Ascanius' killing by Grendel's mother. And one of the most poignant passages in the poem describes the sorrow of King Hrothgar after one of his sons had accidentally killed another; by the code of kinship Hrothgar was forbidden to kill or to exact compensation from a kinsman, yet by the same code he was required to do one or the other in order to avenge the dead. Caught in this dilemma, Hrothgar became so desolate that he could no longer face life.

It is evident that the need to take vengeance would create never-ending feuds, which the practice of marrying royal princesses to the kings or princes of hostile tribes did little to mitigate, though the purpose of such marriages was to replace hostility by alliance. Hrothgar wishes to make peace with the Heathobards by marrying his daughter to their king. Ingeld, whose father was killed by the Danes, but as Beowulf predicts, sooner or later the Heathobards' desire for vengeance on the Danes will erupt, and there will be more bloodshed. And the Danish princess Hildeburh, married to Finn of the Jutes, will see her son and her brother both killed while fighting on opposite sides in a battle at her own home, and ultimately will see her husband killed by the Danes in revenge for his brother's death. Beowulf himself is, for a Germanic hero, curiously free of involvement in feuds of this sort, though he does boast that he avenged the death of his king, Hrothgar, on his slayer Grendel. Yet the possibility—or inevitability—of sudden attack, sudden change, swift death is omnipresent in Beowulf; men seem to be caught in a vast web of repetitious and counterpointed from which there is little hope of escape. This is the aspect of the poem which is apt to make the most powerful impression on the reader—its strong sense of doom.

Beowulf himself is chiefly concerned not with tribal feuds but with fatal evil both less and more complex. Grendel and the dragon are threats to the security of the lands they infest just as human enemies would be, but they are not part of the social order and presumably have no one to avenge their deaths (that Grendel's mother appeared as an avenger seems to have been a surprise both to Beowulf and to the Danes). On the other hand, because they are outside the normal order of things, they require of their conqueror something greater than normal warfare requires. In each case, it is the clear duty of the king and his companions to put down the evil. But the Danish Hrothgar is old and his companions unenterprising, and excellent though Hrothgar has been in the kingship, he nevertheless lacks the quality that later impels the old Beowulf to fight the dragon that threatens his people. The poem makes no criticism of Hrothgar for this lack; he merely seems not to be the kind of man—one might almost say he was not fated—to develop his human potential to the fullest extent that Fate would permit: that is Beowulf's role. In under-taking to slay Grendel, and later Grendel's mother, Beowulf is testing his relationship with unknowable destiny. At any time, as he is fully aware, his luck may abandon him and he may be killed, as, indeed, he is in the otherwise successful encounter with the dragon. But whether he lives or dies, he will have done all that any man could do to develop his character heroically. It is this consciousness of testing Fate that probably explains the boasting that modern readers of heroic poetry often find offensive. When he boasts, Beowulf is not only demonstrating that he has chosen the heroic way of life, but is also choosing it, for when he invokes his former courage as pledge of his future courage, his boast becomes a vow; the hero has put himself in a position from which he cannot withdraw.

Courage is the instrument by which the hero realizes himself. "Fate often saves an unaided man when his courage is good," says Beowulf in his account of his swimming match; that is, if Fate has not entirely doomed a man in advance, courage is the quality that can perhaps influence Fate against its natural tendency to doom him now. It is this complex statement (in which it is hard to read the will of God for Fate) that Beowulf's life explores: he will use his great strength in the most courageous way by going alone, even unaided, against monsters. Doon, of course, ultimately claims him, but not until he has fulfilled to its limits the pagan ideal of a heroic life. And despite the desire he
often shows to Christianize pagan rites, the Christian poet remains true to the older tradition, then, at the end of his poem, he leaves us with the impression that Beowulf's chief reward is pagan immortality: the memory in the minds of later men of a hero's heroic actions. The poem itself is, indeed, a noble expression of that immortality.

FR. KLAEBER

The Christian Coloring†

The presentation of the story-material in Beowulf has been interpreted, to a considerable extent, by ideas derived from Christianity.

The poem abounds, to be sure, in superstitious elements of pre-Christian survivals. Heathen practices are mentioned in several places, such as the vowing of sacrifices at idle times (175 ff.), the observing of omens (204), the burning of the dead (1317 ff., 1337 ff.), and the pronouncements of fate (1220 ff.), all of which were considered by the Church. The frequent allusions to the powers of fate ** * * * the motive of blood revenge ** * * * the praise of worldly glory ** * * * bear testimony to an ancient background of pagan conceptions and ideals. On the other hand, we hear nothing of angels, saints, relics, of Christ and the cross, of divine worship, church observances, of any particular dogmatic principles. Such a general impression we obtain from the reading of the poem is certainly the opposite of pagan heresies. We almost seem to move in normal Christian surroundings, God's government of the world and of every human being, the evil of sin, the doings of the devil, the last judgment, heaven and hell are evokes and are referred to as familiar topics. ** * * * Through most short, these allusions, however, are remarkable frequency how thoroughly the whole life was felt to be dominated by Christian ideas. The author is clearly familiar with the traditional Christian terminology in question and omits every knowledge of the Bible, liturgy, and ecclesiastical literature. Of specific motives derived from the Old Testament (and occurring in Genesis A also) we note the story of Cain, the giants, and the deluge (107 ff., 148 ff., 1860 ff.), and the song of Oracion (93 ff.).

Furthermore, the transformation of old heathen elements in accordance with Christian thought may be readily observed. The pagan and heroic cemeteries find a counterpart in the peaceful burial of the dead, which the Church enforced. (1007 ff., 2457 ff., cp. 445 ff., 3147 ff.). The curse placed on the fateful treasure is clothed in a Christian formula (1271 ff.), and is declared to be void before the higher will of God (1254 ff.). By the side of the heathen fate is seen the almighty God. God's word was his tell ["Fate always goes as it must"], excludes Beowulf in expectation of the Grendelian fight, 452, but against, in the same speech, he says: "Ne gylfan sacen dricians done or wedef doh ofi nimeod ["The one whom death takes can trust the Lord's judgment", 440. The functions of fate and God seem quite parallel: with ofi noref unfangæ eorl ["Fate does save an undermined man": 1272], we do not unhunga eorl godian ["Wean end westreoc a sle Wælcan beohst/ holdo gehaldæ ["So may any undamaged man who holds favor from the Ruler easily come through his woes and misery"], 2262. ** * * Yet God is said to control fate: nesum hime wexli God's word fyrtestaf/ and then manner mod ["if wise God and the man's courage had not foreclosed that fate"], 1256. Moreover, the fundamental contrast between the good God and the blind and hostile fate is shown by the fact that God invisibly grants victory (even in the tragic dragon fight, 2574). whereas it is a mysterious, hidden spell that brings about Beowulf's death, 3067 ff. Predominantly Christian are the central tone of the poem and its ethical viewpoint. We are no longer in a genuine pagan atmosphere. The sentiment has been softened and purified. The court of moderation, usefulness, consideration for others is practised and appreciated. The main motifs thus to express gratitude to God on all imaginable occasions (65 ff., 1297 L, 928 ff., * * *), and the poet's sympathy with weak and unfortunate beings like Scyld the foundling (7, 26) and even Grendel (e.g., 105, 77, 975, 975, 1351) and his mother (1546 ff.), are typical of the new note. Particularly striking is the moral refinement of the two principal characters, Beowulf and Hrothgar. Those readers who, impressed by Beowulf's matchless appearance at the beginning of the act, expect to find an aggressive warrior hero of the Achilles or Sigfroi type, will be disposed at times to think him somewhat tame, sentimental, and fond of talking. Indeed, the final estimate of the hero's character by his own faithfulthane lamenting his death is chiefly a praise of Beowulf's gentleness and kindness: ceowadd freah he wæs wundningen/ manna midbiest and monouthwereti/ ludum libes and loldgeormest ["They said that


he was of world-kings the mildest of men, and the gentlest, kindest to his people, and most eager for fame"], p. 156.

The Christian elements are almost without exception so deeply
imbued in the very fabric of the poem that they cannot be ex-
plained away as the work of a reviser or later interpolator. In
addition, it is instructive to note that all but three of those modern influences, the man story has been thoroughly imbued with the spirit of Christianity. It is true, the
time, but the quality of the plot is changed. The author has fairly
excited the fights with fiendish monsters into a conflict between the
powers of good and of evil. The figure of Grímnir, at any rate, while
as a sort of Christian devil. Many of his appellations are unquestionable epithets
of Satan (e.g., feind namen wesen ['enemy of mankind'], Codex
ambrosianus ['God's enemy'], found on helle ['the devil in hell']), helle
['the devil-slave'] * * * ), he belonged to the wicked progeny
of Cain, the first murderer, his actions are represented in a manner
suggesting the conduct of the evil one * * * , and he dwells with
3557 #). Even the antagont of the third adventure, though less
personally conceived than the Grímnir pair, is not free from the
impulse of similar influences, especially as the dragon was in
the ecclesiastical tradition the recognized symbol of the archfiend.

That the victorious champion, who overcomes this group of
monsters, is a deviously unusual figure of very uncertain historical
associations, has been pointed out before. The poet has raised
him to the rank of a singularly spotless hero, a 'defending, protect-
ing' being, a truly ideal character. We might even feel
inclined to the same features of the Christian Savior in the
thought and deed, the king that dies for his people. Though
deftly kept in background, such a Christian interpretation of
the main story on the part of the Anglo-Saxon author could not
possibly add strength and tone to the entire poem, it helps to
explain one of the great puzzles of our epic. It would be

Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics

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Neatly all the censure, and most of the praise, that has been
bestowed on The Beowulf has been due either to the belief that
it was something that it was not—for example, primitive, pagan, Teo-

tonic, an allegory (political or mythical), or most often, an epic;
or to disappointment at the discovery that it was itself and not some-
thing that the scholar would have liked better—for example, a
heathen heroic lay, a history of Sweden, a manual of Germanic
antiquities, or a Nordic Summa Theologica.

I would express the whole industry in yet another allegory. A
man inherited a field in which was an accumulation of old stone,
part of an older hall. Of the old stone some had already been used
in building the house in which he actually lived, not far from the
old house of his fathers. Of the rest he took some and built a tower.
But his friends coming perceived at once (without troubling to
climb the steps) that these stones had formerly belonged to a more
ancient building. So they pushed the tower over, with no little
labour, in order to look for hidden carvings and inscriptions, or to
discover whence the man's distant forefathers had obtained their
building material). Some suspecting a deposit of coal under the soil
began to dig for it, and forgot even the stones. They all said: "This
tower is most interesting." But they also said (after pushing it
over): "What a muddle it is in!" And even the man's own de-
sendants, who might have been expected to consider what he had
been about, were heard to murmur: "He is such an odd fellow! Imagine
his using these old stones just to build a nonsensical tower! Why
did he not restore the old house? He had no sense of propor-
tion." But from the top of that tower the man had been able to
look out upon the sea.

I hope I shall show that this allegory is just—even when we
consider the more recent and more suggestive critics (whose con-
sciousness is in tension with literalness). To reach these we must pass in

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2. The Christian term given the silicon region (E. J. Rees and others) is the chief
exception, but * * *

3. Th. 158, 159.

4. Ope (J. A. M. K. K. 1578

5. Anglo-Saxon Poem on 36a, 100, 166, 1879.

6. The Traveller's Song, and the Battle of

Foxwarsh, and ed. (London, 1833)

7. Ed. i, p. 333, the in a context from

north of the ravine of marbles to English will

Glossing the poem, the poet has continued the theory

and Thoms.—With all the heroes of the

narrative treat of the brave in his

characterization of the heroes of the

J. R. R. TOLKIEN

* Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics, in J. R. R. Tolkien, P.R.A.

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rapid flight over the heads of many decades of critics. As we do to a conflicting babel mounts up to us, which I can report as something after this fashion. "Beowulf is a half-baked native epic for development of which was killed by Latin learning: it was inspired by collection of Virgil, and it is a product of the education that cause in with Christianity, it is false and inconsistent as a narrative; the rules of narrating are closely observed in the manner of the learned epic; it is the confined province of a crafty nobleman and probably a semi-savage Anglo-Saxon. This is a Cælia voice; it is a string of pagan laws edited by monks. It is the work of a learned but insecure Christian antiquarian; it is a work of genius, rare and surprising in the period, though the genius seems to have been shown generally in doing something much better left undone (this is a very recent voice); it is a wild folk-tale (general chorus); it is a poem of an unrestrained and courtly tradition (same voices); it is a stock-pot, it is a sociological, archaeological, anthropological document; it is a musical allegory (very old voices these and generally shouted down, but not so far as some of the newer ones); it is crude and rough; it is a masterpiece of mythical art: it has no shape at all; it is singularly weak in construction; it is a clever allegory in contemporary politics (old John Egil with some slight support from Mr. Girum, only they lack to periodical parts); its architecture is solid; it is thin and deep (a Milton voice); it is unembarrassed (the same voice); it is a national epic; it is a translation from the Danile, it was imported by Frisian traders; it is a bastard to English syllabes; and (final universal chorus of all voices) it is worth studying." It is not surprising that it should now be felt that a view, a decision, a conviction are imperatively needed. But it is plainly only in the consideration of Beowulf as a poem, with an inherent poetic significance, that any view or conviction can be resolved or steadily held. ** * * * In Beowulf we have ** an historical poem about the pagan past, or an attempt at one—literary historical fidelity founded on modern research was, of course, not attempted. It is a poem by a learned man writing of old times, who looking back on the heroic and narrow heath in them something permanent and something symbolic. So far from being a confused semi-pagan—automatically unlikely for a man of this sort in the period—he brought probably first to his task a knowledge of Christian poetry, especially that of the Carolinian school, and especially Cælia. He seeks his mission. 1. I breathe nothing that has not reason. 2. Beowulf, the Monsters and the Critics. 3. Beowulf could not possibly be a book in the old sense. 4. The literature of the class, whole or almost so, has been written, but I do not, of course,
only used in the making of a raw thing! The notion, that the important matters are put on the outer edges nisses this point of activity, and indeed fails to see why the old things have in Beowulf such a power as to adorn himself with much snobbery so appealing. His poem has more value in consequence, and is a greater contribution to early medieval thought than the bard and similarly-wise were the foils all the heroes to the devil. We may be thankful that the product of the old topic has been preserved by chance; (if such it be) from the danger of destruction.

The preservation of the poem, so coveted, is not really difficult to perceive, if we look to the main points, the strategy, and neglect the most points of minor tactics. We must dismiss, of course, from mind the notion that Beowulf is a "narrative poem," that it tells a tale or intends to tell a tale sequentially. The poem "has steady advance": so Klages heads a critical section in his edition, but the poem was not meant to adjust, steadily or unconsciously. It is essentially a balance, in opposition of ends and beginnings, in its simplest term is a contrasted description of two moments in a great life, rising and setting; an elaboration of the ancient and intensely woying contrast between youth and age, first achievement and final death. It is divided in consequence into two opposed positions, different in matter, manner, and length; 1. from 1 to 219, (including an omission of 21 lines); 2. from 220 to 319 (the end). There is no reason to call at this proportion; in any case, for the purpose and the production of the required effect, it proves in practice to be right.

The simple and static structure, solid and strong, is in each part much discussed, and capable of enduring this treatment. In the conduct of the presentation of Beowulf's rise to fame on the one hand, and of his kingdom and death on the other, criticism can find things to quarrel about, especially if it is captious, but also much to praise, if it is attune. But the only serious weakness, or apparent weakness, is the long suspension; the report of Beowulf to Hrothgar. This nescapation is well done. Without serious discrepancy it entitles rapidly the events in Helmet, and retouches the account, and it serves to illustrate, since he himself descries his own doings, yet again vividly the character of a young man, singled out by destiny, as he steps suddenly forth in his full power. Yet this is perhaps not quite sufficient to justify the repetition. The explanation, if not complete justification, is probably to be sought in different directions.

For one thing, the old tale was not first told or invented by this poet. So much is clear from the investigation of the folk-tale analogues, of course, of mass authority, and all who have used it have altered much from it.

Even the legendary association of the Scylding court with a marveling monster, and with the arrival from abroad of a champion and deliverer was probably already old. The plot was not the poet's, and though he has refined feeling and significance into its crude material, that plot was not a perfect vehicle of the theme or the theme that came to hidden life in the poet's mind to be worked upon. Not an unusual event in literature. For the contrast—youth and death—it would probably have been better, if we had no journeying. If the single nation of the Geats had been the same, we should have felt the stage not anymore, but symbolically wider. More plainly should we have perceived in one people and their bear all mankind and its brothers. This at any rate I have always myself felt in reading Beowulf, but I have also felt that this defect is neutralized by the bringing of the tale of Grendal to Geatland. As Beowulf stands in Hrothgar's hall and tells his story, he was led from ages in the land of his own people, and is no longer in danger of appearing a mere wrouth, an unrust adventure and eager bogey that do not concern him.

There is in fact a double division in the poem: the fundamental one already referred to, and a secondary but important division at line 1687. After that the essentials of the previous part are taken up and repeatedly, so that all the tragedy of Beowulf is contained between, s.58 and the end. But, of course, without the first half we should miss much mediecal illustration; we should miss also the dark background of the court of Beowulf that boiled as large in glory and dooms in ancient northern imagination as the court of Arthur: no view of the past was complete without it. And (most important) we should lose the direct contrast of youth and age in the persons of Beowulf and Hrothgar which is one of the chief premises of this section. It ends with the pregnant words oh shall- be yot heauman nagertu wisanum, so he get munne geungu [until age took from him the joys of his strength—old age that has often burned many].

In any case we must not view this poem as an instruction an exciting narrative or a toasty tale. The very nature of Old English poetry is often misjudged. In it there is the single Thematic pattern progressing from the beginning of a love to the end, and repeated with variation in other lines. The lines do not go according to a time. They are founded on a balance; an opposition between two halves of roughly equivalent linguistic weight, and significant content, which are more often rhythmically contrasted

3. The main anti-thetical structures throughout are so clear that they are only given by the popularisation, the rich investment of the folk-tale analogues. A significant, but not insignificant note, possibly not so much things may be performed by omission.
than similar. They are more like memory than music. In this fundamental fact of poetic expression I think there is a parallel to the total structure of Beowulf. Beowulf is indeed the most suc-
cessful of English poetry because in it the elements—language, metre, theme, inscription—are all in perfect harmony. Judgement of
the verse has often gone astray through listening for an artificial rhythm and pattern; and it seems to fail and stumble. Judgement of the theme goes astray through considering it as the narrative handling of a plot; and it seems to fail and stumble. Language and verse, of course, differ from stone or wood or paint, and can be only
heard or seen in a sequence; so that in any plot that deals at all with characters and events some narrative element must be provided. We have none the less in Beowulf a method and structure
that within the limits of the verse-kind approaches rather to sculp-
ture or painting. It is a composition not a tune.
This is clear in the second half. In the struggle with Grendel one
care as a barrier diminishes the certainty of literary experience that
the hero will not fail perish, and allow oneself to share the hopes
and fears of the Geats upon the shore. In the second part the author
has no degree whatever that the time should remain open, even
according to literary convention. There is no need to hasten like
the messengers, who ride to bear the lamentable news to the
wailing people (560-81). They may have hoped, but we are not sup-
posed to. By now we are supposed to have gusted the plan. Disaster
is foreshadowed. Instead it is the theme. Triumph over the lines of man's
precocious feverishness is over, and we approach slowly and reluctantly
the inevitable victory of death.
"In Structure," it was said of Beowulf, "it is curiously weak, in
a sense perfunctory, though great merits of detail were allowed.
In structure actually it is curiously strong, in a sense inevitable,
though there are defects of detail. The general design of the poet
is not only defensible, it is, I think, admirable. There may have
previously existed stirring verse dealing in straightforward manner
and even in natural sequence with the Beowulf's deeds, or with the
Ep of Heligca; or again with the fluctuations of the feel between
the homes of Herotith the Geat and Onorinerv the Souled; or with
the wages of the Heorot, and the treason that destroyed the
Scylding dynasty. Indeed this seems to be admitted to be prac-
tically certain that with the existence of such connected legend-
hood connected to the mind, not necessarily dealt with in chronicle.
That the peculiar beauty of en-
try, in Beowulf, lies in this
present account to Beowulf is not,
that a great man. This poetic
lying not achieve the death of a
nnly Wener, is the temporally
uailation of (I) God-Kinlred. Within the funeral of passing
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ancient poetic towards the past. Beowulf is not a "primitive" poem; it is a late one, using the materials (then still plentiful) preserved from a day already changing and passing, a time that has now forever vanished, swallowed in oblivion, using them for a new purpose, with a wider sweep of imagination, if with a less bitter and concentrated force. When new Beowulf was already antiquarian, in a good sense, and it now produces a singular effect. For it is now to us itself antique, and yet its maker was telling of things already old and weighted with regret, and he expended his art in making keen that trench upon the heart which sorrow have that are both poignant and remote. It the funeral of Beowulf moved once like the echo of an ancient drum, faofoi and hopeless, it is to us a summary brought over the hills, an echo of an echo. There is not much poetry in the world like this, and though Beowulf may not be among the very greatest poems of our western world and its tradition, it has its own individual character, and peculiar solemnity; it would still have power had it been written in some time or place unknown and without posterity, if it contained no name that could now be recognized or identified by research. Yet it is in fact written in a language that after many centuries has still essential kinship with our own, it was made in this land, and moves in our northern world beneath our northern sky, and for those who are native to that tongue and land, it must ever call with a profound appeal—and the dragon comes.

KENNETH SISAM

The Structure of Beowulf

In 1938 Professor Tolkien delivered his lecture on Beowulf, the Monsters and the Critics,1 which brought fresh ideas and has influenced all later writers on the poem. Knowing well the detailed problems that occur critics, he has withdrawn from them to give a general view of Beowulf as poetry, with a freshness of perception and elegance of expression that are rare in this field. The lecture, with its subsidiary notes, requires very careful reading. It does not lend itself to summary or dissertation. As an account of what the poem means to Professor Tolkien, or of the way in which he, as a study-