DEATH AFTER THE BANQUET:

THE ELEGIAC UNITY OF <u>BEOWULF</u>

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In a book the ideas of another's consciousness are given shape and communicated, by literary form, to the reader. The structure of the work becomes the tool of the writer for creating a certain level of shared consciousness with his reader. The reader's aim is to remain open, that is to allow that individual to reveal his inner thoughts to the reader within his own consciousness. By questioning the object before him -- the formal, material shape of the work -- the reader is lead to the final question of who or what is the subject presenting these thoughts.[1]

Literary criticism, therefore, can approach the author's meaning through his created formal reality. Form is how the meaning is stated, what organization is given to the thoughts of the subject. Meaning then becomes inherent in form since the structural elements should create a literary language authentic to the purpose of the author. To understand form isn't merely to appreciate its various aspects apart of the work's intent; criticism must show how the formal reality allows for the subjective meaning. Form is important as a road to what the author has to say and all formal criticism must look beyond to this goal which transcends the material aspect of the book.[2]

Accepting this, a literary work can be seen as a special utterance given a definite shape and meaning by the rules inherent in its formal elements.[3] The genre of a work is this formal totality that allows the reader to share in this determined meaning and avoid misreading the work. Meaning therefore is genre-bound, contained in the elements of its particular traditional form. Even literary invention is ultimately defined by its role

in the tradition, because its participation in the tradition is what makes it literature.[4]

Yet this tradition is never static or linear; genres live in a state of flux and are subject to change along with the structures of society. One accepted formal unity, such as the allegory, dies when the beliefs associated with it pass away; the genre is no longer capable of presenting the truths that concern authors. Certain phases can be described in the history of genres: first there is the compiling of various motifs and styles to give the genre its first shape; then through pure formal imitation the genre can be fixed; later as beliefs shift, the genre may be burlesqued or given a higher meaning. In either case it undergoes a radical recasting with numerous conscious innovations by the author; finally it either slips into oblivion or is shattered into as many elements again.[5] An example of the progress can be seen in the genre of classical tragedy where Sophocles consciously imitated the accepted form but Euripedes introduced radical changes in characterization and subject matter - when the genre appeared again Samson Agonistes it was used only to defeat itself in the higher reality of Milton's society.

Thus, generic criticism is one road through form to the meaning of a work, if done with an eye to the stage of generic development and the historical social system of the author. By uncovering its generic elements the formal totality of a work can be discovered and its meaning understood.

Beowulf is the first major achievement in the English literary tradition. Being so old, however, it is distanced from the modern

reader, and the society out of which it came is obscure and ambiguous to him. As a result there is much more debate over Beowulf's meaning than there would be over any more recent works. A great deal of the debate over the poem is brought on by the lack of any agreement on its genre, although in past years a consensus seems to be growing among critics and the issue shows signs of resolution.

After all the action is over and Beowulf is dead and buried, the reader is left with the question of what it all means: is Beowulf in heaven, or hell, or is he just another dead hero? Much of the poem's ambiguity arises out of its dual vision. Two social codes are present at once - the Christianity of the narrator and the pagan world he depicts. Linked with this ambiguity in subject matter is an equally ambiguous narrative technique. Klaeber feels that this lack of smooth progression is a major flaw in the poem,[6] but Bonjour's work on the digression reveals a definite unity of allusive effect that proves that the discontinuity is intentional and contributes to the author's plan.

I am assuming for the purposes of this paper, the consensus that Beowulf is the product of a single, Christian poet writing between 600 A.D. and 800 A.D. anywhere in England. The society that produced Beowulf is to be seen as a highly sophisticated Christian culture with a long standing native and Christian literary tradition. The poem's audience would have to be aware of all its allusions - historic, Christian and pagan.[7] Yet any attempt to define the meaning of Beowulf out of its social context is invariably limited. We don't know, and can't assume,

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any definite identity for the author and where he stood with his audience, except from the work itself. Dorothy Whitelock's book The Audience of Beowulf reveals a great deal but can't move toward the essential issue of what Beowulf means.

The purpose of this paper is to make a generic investigation of the poem and, if possible, reveal what it means by defining what it is. Since the poem comes from a definite and somewhat known tradition, generic criticism offers a far better approach than that of The Audience of Beowulf. The unity of the poem's structure and its place in the Anglo-Saxon tradition should discover its determined meaning. Most commonly the poem is referred to as an epic, but what is meant by "epic"? Genre study shouldn't seek merely to place the poem in some static class, but rather view its generic elements in order to determine their usage towards the general effect of the poem. Quite simply all this paper can offer is to restate how exactly the Christian significance is placed over the pagan subject matter in the terms of the genres of the literary tradition contemporary to the Beowulf poet.

I

It isn't hard to see why Beowulf is, for the most part, referred to as an Anglo-Saxon epic; a glorious and heroic past is evoked by the lofty, dignified language of the opening lines and by the haunting description of Scyld Scefing's funeral. The poet's concern is with the heroes and kings that played the most noble roles in this distant past. Lineages and epithets are integral to the poem's movement. Among the past heroes, Beowulf shines as the brightest and mightiest; the whole poem moves around this hero

and his daring and noble exploits. He moves about only amongst this glorious dignified courtly class and is crucially aligned with the entire course of his nation's history. Not only is the Beowulf poet concerned with a lofty subject, but apparently he is also dealing with a dignified audience. In The Audience of Beowulf Dorothy Whitelock points out that a sophisticated, educated audience only could have grasped the rich allusions of the poem, an argument which points to a courtly audience, the class that would identify most closely with the historical and political concerns of the poem.

In all these features, Beowulf resembles what is called a primary or first phase epic. This epic consists of an oral performance before a courtly audience relating a supposed historical event. Being delivered before a court, the primary epic, as a solemn event, demanded the gravity and dignity in expression that would fit court decorum. The concern of this poetry is with the honor and etiquette of a hero who is the exemplar of his system.[8]

The hero is an exemplar not just of the heroic code of the past, but he also embodies the code of the audience itself; in the primary epic the past is interpreted out of the present, the hero being as much a representative of the audience as of his own era. This epic is, therefore, orally delivered as an instrument of self-awareness for the ruling class of the contemporary society. As such the primary epic embraces the real world realistically with, however, a strong emphasis on the world of the nobility.[9]

As noted above, Beowulf displays several of the characteristics of this primary epic, but it is not fundamentally of this genre. The past isn't homogeneous with the present, but the two societies

are juxtaposed. The narrator stands outside a distant past and moralizes, criticizing its shortcomings. In no true primary epic would a line such as "They bore hell in (their) minds, they knew not thee Lord" (179-180) occur. Without this homogeneity, Beowulf cannot be referred to as a primary epic. In addition, given the continuity of the Anglo-Saxon literary tradition, as argued by Greenfield in his Critical History of Old English Literature, and the complexity of Beowulf's structure point away from the purely oral composition that would be required of a primary epic.

Within a literary society, a new form of epic is created. Out of the awareness of a tradition, an attention to form grows; this attention to form brings forth a formalized epic world picture and subject matter. This is the secondary or second phase epic.[10] C. S. Lewis gives a clear picture of what exactly such an epic consists in his Preface to Paradise Lost. The past is given a place in world history; there is a sense of onward movement in time and history towards some goal - the idea of time as mere flux in the primary epic is lost. Everything is reshaped around the higher goal. The hero is a national hero who is duty-bound and self-sacrificing; he is conscious of his historical role in bringing about his nation's destiny, this being his fate. The past is seen in terms of the present, but only as this movement towards history's end. Coupled with this new world view, there is the awareness of traditional form and the epic imitates a previous, standard epic form. In this manner, the Aeneid is a conscious imitation of the Homeric epics with the subject matter given the new twist of world destiny and nationalistic heroism.[11]

Beowulf can be seen as a nationalistic hero; the destiny of the Geats is inextricably bound with his personal fate, just as the rise of the Danes is tied to Scyld's birth. Social history is never divorced from the poem, though Beowulf may only encounter supernatural foes; the digressions keep the reader aware of what is happening around Beowulf. Likewise the digressions create the wider time scope required by a secondary epic. Reading Beowulf as a secondary epic would demand a view of him as a Germanic Aeneas, aligning himself with his nation's destiny and sacrificing himself for the common good.

Haber's study of Beowulf and the Aeneid seeks to show how the poem is derived from the older epic and is a similar secondary epic. Starting from the view that the poem is a carefully wrought book epic, literary in composition and not oral, Haber points out numerous parallels between the two works. The "hero over nations" and the formal speeches are argued to be non-Germanic techniques. Most importantly, however, Haber illustrates several linguistics derivations in Beowulf, pointing to Latin influence. In particular, Beowulf displays more frequent usage of the passive voice and the dropped article than can be found in other Anglo-Saxon poetry.[12] This study reveals, indeed, that the Beowulf poet had read widely in the classics and new Latin, and that the classics influenced his language usage and, to a limited extent, his subject matter, but in no way does it reveal the Aeneid or any other epic to be the shaping influence of this poem.[13]

The key to understanding Vergil is reading him out of Homer - his is a formal imitation with the form actually shaping the content.

Beowulf has neither the same formal structure - note all the
arguments about its narrative movement - nor the same stately
pacing; its metrics as well as its structure is harsh and dialectic.
Moreover the moral intent of the poet is not to show the shape and
process of history as world destiny, but to show the past in failure.
The world history of Vergil becomes a chaos of rising and falling
nations without sense or purpose. Beowulf is not the devout military
hero that Aeneas is; he is a tragic figure who dies what appears to
be a meaningless death, since his people face nothing but sorrow and defeat
despite the dead dragon and all his treasure.[14] In no way does the
poem's final impact resemble that of the Aeneid.

Therefore, to define Beowulf as an epic leads one no closer to
revealing its meaning. The epic features of the poem are subservient
to those drawn from the native genres employed by the poet. Since the
poem can't be explained unless these genres are explored, it is best
to turn to them now.

II

The basis for Beowulf's story line derives from Germanic native
lore, not classical mythology or Christian literature. It is a folk
tale about a monster killer that is given an historical perspective.
The Christian poet uses his Germanic legend to communicate not just
information about the past, but to put the past into a Christian
perspective, to see the inferior pagan system from the eyes of a
Christian aware of what is eternal and important.[15] Unlike any of
the epics, there is a split between past and present and out of this
split comes the distanced, moralizing narrator. Yet how was he
handling the extant forms of native folk literature?

Beowulf's author aligns himself with his native heritage by employing the oral formulaic language and metrics of the Germanic tradition. Oral poetry consists of the reshaping and alternating of these standard formulae, and Beowulf is structured around these. This poetic tradition yokes its lines by alliteration in souhd and by standard epithets in sense. Each line is harsh but economic, moving by dialectic comparison and contrast of sound and sense.[16]

Germanic heoric lays and folk legends - aspects from both are evidenced in Beowulf as heroes fight and monsters attack - derive from a common mythic pool. The Trans-Germanic qualities of Beowulf itself, an English poem about Danes and Swedes, prove this.[17] The formal manifestation of these myths and legends are the ballads and lays handed down orally through the generations, such as those compiled in Child's famous collection. These ballads have a brief, oral structure and are pre-literary in technique and approach. The focus is on a particular dramatic situation in order to elicit some emotional response. The structure is episodic with gaps in the narrative between the two or more episodes; repetitions of epithets and even longer passages are common, often as refrains. The ballad may be styled on direct discourse or a stylized dialogue. The most simple of ballads puts forth no moral statement, is indefinite in time, and develops no individualized characters; the situation itself is in control. However, when given an heroic, and thus more historic, subject matter, the ballad becomes more complex. The characters are kings and knights with special focus on father/son relationships. Valor and the quest for fame shape the attitudes of the characters, who live in a world of all-conquering swords and magical armor -

the supernatural is as real as the natural. The aim is still the emotional impact, but, because these are heroes, the characters are developed more distinctly. The most common character type is the heroic youth seeking adventure, the ballad focussing on his great successes and victory. Although the Germanic warrior ethic and comitatus system create the ballad's atmosphere, there is no explicit didactic purpose. It is important to note that these episodic ballads, written in the oral formulaic tradition, have no smooth narrative movement; there are gaps in the narrative and the verse itself halts and repeats itself, not out of poetic incompetence, but because the genre demands such a style.[18]

The Elder Edda is the prime example of the most lofty heroic ballads. They were composed in an oral tradition in the same meter as Beowulf. Obscure allusions can be found throughout this collection, indicating the vast Germanic mythic pool and in keeping with the ballad style. With a sense of inevitable doom overriding the action of the gods and heroes, fame and valor in the face of death become the only hope for immortality. The gods themselves are pictured as superheroes, but heroes more than abstract gods; they are involved in the comitatus system and warrior ethic as much as mortals are.[19] The parallels between the Elder Edda and Beowulf are as common as those between Beowulf and the Aeneid: Loki's flyting of the gods is parallel to Unferth's taunting of Beowulf at Hrothgar's feast. The same sense of the supernatural is found in the Elder Edda as was found in the other heroic ballads, weapons have personalities and historied and trolls and the great dragon are accepted realities.

In many ways Beowulf is the consummate heroic ballad both by

nature of its style and subject matter. Beowulf himself must be viewed as the ideal of the heroic code, confident in his own strength and open to his inevitable fate. The comitatus ethical system shapes Beowulf's thoughts and deeds; he is always aware of his social responsibilities as his acts of mercy and self-sacrifice reveal.[20] The poem can be divided into two halves here, one revealing the youthful confidence and cunning of a hero, the other, the prudence and wisdom of a king. In the first half we see the young Beowulf grasping situations and acting upon them chivalrically and courageously, for example his encounter with Unferth. Hrothgar sits as an aged example of wisdom without action or strength, the impotent king of an impotent and beseiged nation. In the second part Beowulf becomes the ideal king acting upon his responsibilities within the comitatus system with wisdom temperance - he doesn't seek the treasure for himself but for his people. Hygelac as opposed to Hrothgar, is an example of action without prudence or responsibility.[21]

The first part especially reflects the genre of heroic ballads. The wild rocky coast is a typical ballad setting where the youthful hero, bringing light and hope, accomplishes his quest. The theatrical formality of Hrothgar's court recalls the stylized dialogues of Germanic balladry. The essential elements of the heroic ballad, or lay, in the poem are its focus on a particular situation - the poem doesn't have a steady narrative movement because it is episodic and not narrative at all - and the emphasis on valor and the desire for fame as the motives to the action. The second part seemingly repeats this structure with an emphasis

on the kingly responsibility and with a more mournful tone, but death is inevitable to a hero in the Germanic mythic scheme.[22]

However, Beowulf is more than a simple heroic lay. A simple observance of the highly-wrought, carefully constructed language is enough to see it as a ballad transcended into a higher, more epic form. A new, closer emphasis is placed on the personal motivation itself; it is not just a desire for fame and proven valor that brings Beowulf to Heorot, but it is also an awareness of an obligation owed to Hrothgar through his father - the attack on the dragon is spurred by nothing but this sense of duty. With this carefully articulated motivation comes an observation of the characters' states of mind, particularly at the times of crisis - this is obviously apparent as Beowulf prepares to face the dragon, but is also in evidence as he goes against Grendel's mother. Also involved with this higher articulation of motivation is a constant eye to society and the course of history, which is not a common technique in balladry. Out of this also grows the moralizing of the narrator that is totally against the Germanic tradition. An individual, intellectual poet has obviously reordered an heroic ballad, or created a new one out of the mythic tradition, and, by a free use of the ballad form given it a wider scope and a higher significance. It is a case of the oral ballad tradition being individualized and transcended by art.[23]

However, Beowulf comes off more as the anti-ballad than as the perfected ballad. All the elements of the heroic world in the poem carry with them their own destruction. Wergild, the revenge for a kinsman's death, is shown not as a noble duty, but as the monstrous

maid of Grendel's mother on Heorot. At the same time that Hygd and Wealtheow are shown in the spirit of harmonious feasting and praised as peace-bringers, the fall of the Danish house is revealed, coming out of a failed marriage pact. The whole comitatus system is questioned by the desertion of Beowulf by his companions on the Moors. Grendel is the offspring of Cain for a very particular reason; the spectre of broken familial ties pervades the poem. Unferth kills his brother and betrays his nation just as Haethcyn murders Herebeald. The whole structure of the society is shaken by all these actions and an underlying chaos is revealed. Nor is this rejection of the heroic world found merely in interpersonal relationships; it is a poem of breaking, melting swords and useless treasure. The material objects with their magical charms and the treasures that presumably seal up the comitatus system are useless against Beowulf's foes and don't avert the inevitable fate of his chaotic society; the Geats will fall, with or without the treasure.[24]

The genre can't be that of a pure heroic ballad then since the whole fabric of the heroic code is shattered within it. If the poet does imitate the heroic style, he is doing so only to undermine it. The poet as an individual is thus lifted above the poem itself as its shaping influence; he is doing something new and different and not just retelling an old legend. It is easy to see the split between the movements of the poem, the success of the young Beowulf and the death of the old, and dismiss the poem as merely too juxta-posed episodes, one showing the glories of the heroic past and the other depicting its shortcomings. However, it is not a balanced presentation of two equally valid perspectives on the past. As

Tolkein points out in his essay, "The Monsters and the Critics", the structure of each line reflects the shape of the entire work. The Anglo-Saxon oral formulaic line is yoked by comparison and contrast in sound and sense, just so, through the digressions and different perspectives, the poem progresses. It is a dialectic structure that can make a movement from a digression on Sigemund to one on Heremod, simply on the basis of the contrast in the characters of the two, and then tie these into the poem's movement by placing them after Beowulf's first great victories. The two episodes fit into this dialectic scheme, the first filled with victory, youth and feats of strength with the second ruled by impending defeat and death. The perspective of the poem must be seen in this dialectic arrangement of episodes; the significance must lie in why the poet chose these two episodes and yoked them in such a contrasting, dialectic manner.[25] The key then is to see how the form and content coalesce in one body - the poem can't be viewed merely as two contrasted halves, but, as each alliteration connects a thought, both of the halves must combine into one impression.

With proper attention given to the opening invocation as a funeral and the close as another, less glorious, funeral, death comes forth as the overriding theme. Death is the obvious focus of the second half, but it also underlies the tenuous triumph of the first half. Hrothgar and the Danes are an old king and his doomed nation, just as Beowulf and the Geats are in the second part. The swords melt and are useless against the supernatural foes of the first half and so they are in the second half; the

treasure gives a harsher impact to the tale of useless material goods, but the useless swords against Grendel lay the basis for this impact. The same motifs of fratricide and broken treaties appear in both halves. Everything moves toward the final picture of Beowulf, lying dead amidst his useless material reward unable to give order to the meaningless chaos of history. It is a Christian poet telling of heathen chaos - herein lies the social split that wouldn't allow an epic interpretation.Pagan life is seen as the inevitable, meaningless death after the brief, bright joy of the feast. Given this as the poem's final impression and direction, a Christian moralizing purpose must underlie this reworking of pagan, Germanic legends. The ballad form isn't burlesqued here but is transcended and placed in a Christian context. Indeed it is not the dominating genre of the poem, nor can it be, since the ballad allows no such balancing of opposites and moralizing intent. It is best to look to medieval Christian literature to define the genre that truly defines the totality of Beowulf.

III

The dominant form of Christian poetry in the Anglo-Saxon tradition is the elegy. Influenced by Paulinus and other Latin elegists, the Anglo-Saxon poets used the form of elegy to express, in Christian terms, man's situation on earth within time. The transitory, illusory nature of the earth and earthly are juxta-posed with the eternal and God. The entire basis of the elegy is the contradictory nature of life on earth and the hope for contrasting salvation. The tone of the elegy is, indeed,

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mournal, but out of the lament comes hope and faith, which points
to the only consolation to man's tragic situation.[26] The key
themes then in elegy are those of exile and decay, exile being
the expression of man's having been thrown on to this earth,
insecure and divorced from the eternal and decay, the state of
the world man is thrown into at birth. Man is placed here, born
to die, amongst earthly things that will decay or vanish and
from which he must turn away to face the eternal. These elegies
can be read literally, expressing the immediate, real situation,
or symbolic, noting the imagery that points to the Christian
consolation beyond, or even allegorically, where the immediate
situation is a restatement of an actual Christian situation out
of the liturgy. In all events there is a unity in the attitude
of the elegists, based on this contradictory state of man on
earth, and a similar didactic purpose - the proper way of
approaching this condition is sketched out and any improper
attitude is rejected. Deriving from this unity of outlook and
purpose, the elegies often display similar motifs and techniques
that aid in defining the genre.[27]

"The Ruin" is a simple elegy of the material in decay. The
past splendor, erected by men, has vanished through the inevitable
movement of time and its significance is lost. In technique the
poem alternates between a past and present perspective to heighten
the effect of yesterday decaying into today just as today will
give way to tomorrow.[28]

A more classic elegy is "The Wanderer", which tells of an exile
who, having lost his security, is freed to search for God. The

wanderer's lord, within the comitatus system, is gone and he is
thrown into despair in his new insecurity. Out of despair,
however, grow faith and hope in the face of the eternal and the
wanderer's purpose to move in his search towards God. The basic
elegaic opposition of youth and age is presented in this poem.
The elegaic wisdom, which is knowledge of the trans   and
acceptance of death, is gained only through experience. The
youth of an elegy is full of confidence and bravado, but, after
living his life, he realizes that sorrow is the human lot and
death the final possibility. The hero is first isolated from the
security he has known and then his anxiety turns to faith, in
light of which everything earthly is recognized as insignificant.[29]

In the "Seafarer" another basic elegaic opposition is brought
forth, that of land against the sea. The land is the realm of
false security, pride and gluttony, where man is caught up in his
world of things and doesn't keep the transience of it all in view.
Man at sea is man being watchful and anxious and open to the
transience of life. Freeing himself from the bondage to earthly
that constitutes life on land, the seafarer hungers for the eternal
and looks forward to the final test of death; he accepts his death
holding his course towards it, knowing that beyond it lies the
eternal. To the seafarer, the glory of the past is gone, but only
because it was a mere illusion. With the proper attitude, that is
the life of the sea, he can be confident in escaping the transitory
for the eternal.[30]

As a poem about life and death, it is logical to interpret
Beowulf in terms of this elegaic dialectic of time and the eternal,

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especially since it is a dominant genre of Beowulf's contemporary Anglo-Saxon literary tradition. A study of the poem for elegaic motifs will not be a disappointment.

The lament of the Last Survivor, a mini-elegy set in the midst of the larger poem to enhance the impact of Beowulf's struggle against the dragon by giving the treasure its own history, displays several of the standard elegaic motifs. Here stands a lone watcher, exiled from his social security since all his people have died, guarding over the material remains of that culture. He knows that all he awaits is his own death, after witnessing the fall of his entire nation. Here is the standard elegaic wisdom that consists primarily in the ability to perceive the transience. The Last Survivor knows that only the earth can hold this material wealth, his possession of it can only be temporary. In the face of death, all this wealth is a useless illusion. Yet, like all other digressions in Beowulf, this lament is tied to the over-all movement of the poem; indeed, it reveals the elegaic structure underlying the heroic, epic motifs. The dialectic structure of Beowulf hinges upon the elegaic oppositions: youth is contrasted with age and death; the rise of the Danes is juxtaposed with the fall of the Geats; Beowulf's triumphs are complemented by his failures; the joy of feasting gives way to the sorrow of funerals. Life is strife and chaos on earth and death is the only inevitability, therefore the poem must end in death and ruin.

The poem's setting in both time and place enforces this elegaic vision. The only season mentioned in the poem is winter;

the only times of day, dawn and night - dawn as the bringer of joy and light; night as the bringer of death and monsters. The landscapes are rocky, wild and uncultivated. The only building that is fully described, Heorot, is beset by a curse that brings the wilderness to it instead of the society of men. The sea presides over the setting of the poem with its uncertain surges and storms. Other than sea monsters, the one hunted hart and Beowulf's foes, only ravens and wolves are given a place in the poem. Nature is a hostile and barren wasteland of rocks and black waters.

The material elements of the poem are also given an elegaic presentation, especially the heroic sword. The sword in an heroic ballad is a creation of man's craft and serves as his material aid against foes; it is his protection and security. Elegy puts the entire material world into question and, thus, Beowulf is failed in time of need by his sword, which is as useless and transient as the treasure he seeks. This treatment of weapons and armor points to why Beowulf must face unnatural monsters instead of other heroes. Only these monsters can really expose the swords' material weakness, since they are beyond the arts and crafts of humanity. This is not a poem about a superhero, victorious over every man he faces, but is the tale of a single man's not-so-victorious encounters with forces from the darkness, inhuman and thus beyond the charms of his weapons. It shows man living in a wilderness on earth surrounded by forces of evil and death that are neither created nor understood by him.[31]

If death and burial are the poem's strongest manifestations of

sorrow and darkness, the joy and light of the banquets serve as the contrast. The banquets are the points of the strongest harmony and security in the elegaic scheme of the poem, filled with song of the harp and the bright, polished golden goblets passed around by the queens, the supposed bringers of political harmony. The joy and light of these banquets is tenuous, just as the gold of the survivor's horde dulls without polish. The harmony is only superficial; Unferth assails Beowulf in the midst of the feast and Grendel stalks into the banquet hall obliterating all the joy with his darkness. Moreover it is a goblet, the image of the joy in mead drinking as the pagan communion, that is stolen, bringing on the wrath of the dragon. Death and darkness prove to outweigh the forces of harmony and joy in these feasts.

Placed in this setting and amidst this pagan world of swords and feasts, Beowulf appears as a form of elegaic hero. He stands alone, when he is most strong, without weapons and trusting in his own strength and God's help. He comes, as a sailor, across the sea to face the forces of darkness. This wanderer, lying awake and watchful, awaits Grendel in the darkness of Heorot. Then he ventures into the wilderness of mere and moor to confront his other monstrous foes. As he prepares for his final battle, his words recall the elegaic wisdom of experience as seen in "The Wanderer" and "The Seafarer". He sees the past as flux and loss and realizes his own fate must inevitably be death; accepting all this he goes forth into the darkness to meet his death, resolute and unmoved by greed or pride. The treasure as personal wealth means nothing, he seeks first to rid his nation of the dragon and then to earn the

treasure for their welfare.

There is an obvious flaw to this approach to the treasure
within an elegaic poem and it is in this flaw that the tragic import
of Beowulf lies. His is a material culture based on ring-giving and
valuing swords and armor over all else. Fame and valor are the
motivating forces for heroes in this world, but what is the cause?
If there is a cause, it is to fulfill one's role in the comitatus
system, a system built around material bonds - a man owes fealty to
his lord for the material benefits he derives as Wiglaf himself
states, but this material bond doesn't hold too well against the
dragon because it is only the illusion of a bond. The Geats are a
nation of kings and warriors who seem to live by battle; their
history is one of constant conflict and chaos. Their society, in
the light of elegaic wisdom, can only be seen as meaningless flux.
Hygelac's foolish raid, which must have been motivated by either a
hope for material gain (greed) or by a desire for political power
(pride), show that destruction and death are the only results of
this social system. Given such a society, where love is nothing
more than a form of political motivation, there is no wonder the
banquets are an illusion and the song of the scope gives way to the
dirge - there is little beautiful or eternal to sing about.[32]
Even Beowulf is sterile in this society and is never given a wife.
In other words, the obvious form of continuity, offspring, is
denied and political security has no permanent foothold. Beowulf
accepts this society as his highest reality; he gives up his life
for it. Yet nothing can save such a system, especially this
meaningless treasure.

The society, true to its character, flees before the dragon; only Wiglaf stands with his ring giver. The final situation of the poem, however, doesn't vindicate Wiglaf; it merely presents him as another lonely, lost elegaic hero, the last of his line left with a useless heap of dull gold that can only belong to the earth. Beowulf's death was the foreshadowing of his own nation's death and the Geats are forced to accept inevitable death at the poem's end, both Beowulf's and their own. The old women foreseeing, "evil days, a great deal of slaughter, the terrible humiliation of warriors and captivity", (1533-1535) becomes the portrait of the Geats in the face of this horrible truth. Without faith, their only response to Beowulf's death and their own sealed fate is anxiety and despair. The material solution sought by Beowulf, in his own ignorance, is an illusion.

Part of the two-sided vision of Beowulf is the dual perspective on the hero, in youth and in old age. Since the two sections of the poem are integrally related, it is important to read the character of Hrothgar as a foreshadowing of the aged Beowulf. The two are not totally similar, due to Hrothgar's total impotence and lack of strength; Beowulf depends on no outside savior. However, Hrothgar's most important role in the poem is to deliver the wise speech of warning and advice to the young Beowulf as he leaves Denmark. [33] Speaking out of the wisdom gained in his years of experience, Hrothgar imparts the essence of elegaic wisdom to Beowulf. Most importantly he warns Beowulf away from believing only in his material fortune as truth. God "has power over all" (1727) and gives and takes material benefits as he sees fit; fortunes are in

flux and should never be taken for granted. Hrothgar describes the soul as having a guardian that looks out that it keeps a virtuous course. If this guardian should slumber then, as this watch falls, pride and greed seize the man and, chained to his material possessions, he turns from God and truth.[34] The ultimate situation of earthly life as Hrothgar displays it is old age and death, the body crumbles and decays. In the poem's second part, Beowulf is thrown into this extreme situation and Hrothgar's speech is acted out.[35] Beowulf fails to fulfill the expectations of Hrothgar, however, because he merely follows the dictates of his materialistic society. He doesn't fully perceive his own situation even though he nobly accepts his own personal death. He still exists as a member of pagan society and doesn't look beyond to the eternal. His personal death is not as tragic as his society's paganism, which will keep all their future heroes in a similar context, caught up in the world of things and viewing personal fame as their highest goal. Personal fame is an illusion when all strength comes from God, thus the poem ends on an ironic note.

This paganism of the Geats reveals the basis of the narrator's thematic irony. He constantly looks back at these pagans with the refrain, "They did not know", from his Christian perspective knowing that God gives hope out of the despair of this world.[36] The poem's mood is strongly set with the opening vision of Scyld's funeral boat floating out into the mysterious dark where "men can not tell truly... who took up that burden". (50-51) Evil is dark, mysterious and unconquerable, finally, without God's grace, therein lies all victory over the monsters. Beowulf falls to the dragon because God no longer

willed his victory and because the true light of the true feast is
beyond his knowledge. Without the Christian perspective the elegaic
wisdom that grows out of experience can only lead to despair.

Therefore, the elegaic tradition shapes the final conflict and
impact of the poem, the earthly rejected in the face of the eternal.
It is necessary, since this is a genre study, to observe how the unity
of the poem is defined by its elegaic import. Unlike the elegies
previously cited, Beowulf is a poem of the movement to elegaic wisdom
more than a reflection back from the elegaic position. Beowulf and
the Geats move to this elegaic wisdom of transience; they learn the
dark despair by the events of the poem. The final episode is the harsh
realization of this truth, but the hints of it build up as the poem
progresses; the poem is, indeed, a form of Bildingsroman. The unity
of Beowulf's actions can be seen as the inverse progression of the
fights in terms of Beowulf's dependence of material aids and rewards.
First he fights barehanded and just to fulfill his quest, but when he
goes after Grendel's mother, he bears a sword and is offered rewards.
Finally he is in full armor and is seeking a horde of treasure.[37]
The desertion of his companions becomes more and more apparent in
each fight also. This doesn't mean the poem is a tragedy of greed,
but rather that triumph in terms of a material world is an illusion.
The situation is repeated three times in increasing clarity, until
finally the point is obvious. Experience is knowledge in the elegy
and the poem moves by compiling experiences that shape the under-
standing of the final situation. Beowulf then must be seen as an
elegy. The Christian poet looks back on the past, as seen through
the heroic lays, and pities and understands them. Yet for the pagans,

24

who have not been saved, the final truth can only be, "He who sojourns here in the world in these days of strife must endure much of love and hostility". (1060-1062)

<div align="center">IV</div>

Given a Christian context and style for the poem, it must be determined exactly to what extent Christian themes and motifs underlie Beowulf's pagan story. Specifically, it must be seen whether the poem has, or has not, an allegorical import. It is definitely a Christian poem written with a didactic purpose in mind, but is it also an attempt to describe the Christian liturgy within a pagan legend? Just as it was assumed that the Beowulf poet had read widely in the classics, it must be assumed also that he was familiar with Augustine, who defined what literature should be to a Christian. Seeing all human history as an acting out of God's preconceived plan, Augustine viewed all earthly life as merely a figure of the divine truth. Therefore, the writer should seek to discover evidence of the divine truth in the worldly actions he described. All literature is an allegory of the truth revealed by Christ on earth; even the Old Testament is valued primarily as a prefiguring of the New Testament. According to Augustine, the perception of the writer and reader is to understand these allegorical relationships.[38] The Beowulf poet was familiar with this philosophy obviously, but how did he let it influence his work?

Those who read the poem as a pure allegory focus on Beowulf as the golden, shining hero who drives away the forces of darkness, bringing light and dawn to the Danes and Geats. They emphasize his ideal nobility and dignity, seeing in him the type of Christ. He

<div align="center">25</div>

sacrifices his own life to rid his people of the dragon, accompanied
by twelve thanes and a guide, who, Judas-like, is responsible for
the dragon's ire to begin with. Likewise he dives into the hellish
mere to harrow this hell of its monsters, just as Christ descended
into Hell and rose again.[39]

Yet we can't read the mere as Hell pure and simply. If it is,
where are all the dead, lost souls? This is, indeed, an empty hell,
occupied merely by Grendel's mother and a pile of lost heirlooms of
the giants.[40] The mere's cave serves more as a perverse counterpart
of Heorot, the banquet hall of darkness on earth. Similarly, the
old woman is Beowulf's only prophet and her's is a prophecy of doom
and despair, not faith and salvation. Even Wiglaf doesn't see
Beowulf's death as anything more than the Geats fate sealed; his
death is final without hope of resurrection. At best Beowulf was
a noble pagan blessed with might from God, but it was the loss of
God's favor that spelled his doom. Even in the saints' lives of the
Anglo-Saxon tradition, the pattern called for a miracle at the tomb.[41]
Beowulf's cold burial promises no such apotheosis. He is a hero, a
righteous deliverer from the forces of evil for his contemporaries;
he is the best they can hope for, but his is always an ironic
achievement - death ends all. Beowulf is, indeed, associated with
Christ by imagery and idealistic characterization, but only as a
form of contrast - the poem moves by comparison and contrast and
this is the ultimate contrast. Beowulf is a false Christ, a failed
Savior, incapable of winning the final battle against time and
materiality.

The concrete, semi-historical background Beowulf is placed in

must be accepted as such before the Christian symbolism is interpreted over it. The Christian symbolism does indeed recast this folk legend but not as a pure allegory.[42] The irony and ambiguity of the poem prove the author's detachment from his subject matter. As a sort of pre-Humanist he is reshaping his own native heritage in the light of his own contemporary tradition. The aesthetic distance from Beowulf's tragedy keeps the author from sharing in the woman's despair; the author's asides and Hrothgar's speech point to the other side of the elegaic dialectic, faith in the eternal. Thus the Christian intent of the poem is revealed by appreciating its Christian form. The poem is shaped by the elegaic images and motifs that highlight the contrast between the transience and conflict of this world and God's eternal light. By projecting the poem against its own tradition, and thus defining its genre, what must be its determinate meaning is clarified.[43]

FOOTNOTES

[1] Georges Poulet "The Phenomenology of Reading" New Literary History Vol 1 pp 53-55.

[2] Ibid., pp 65-68.

[3] It is only by accepting such a concept — rules defining a literary utterance — that criticism can even claim to aim at revealing any work's determined meaning. Without the acceptance of tradition, critics can only offer ~~~~~ personal interpretations of an insoluble problem.

[4] Alaister Fowler, "The Life and Death of Literary Forms" New Literary History Vol 2 pp 199-204.

[5] Ibid., pp 205-216.

[6] Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg edited by Fr. Klaeber (Lexington Mass: D.C. Heath and Co, 1950) pp 42 and 43.

[7] James H. Wilson, Christian Theology and Old English Poetry (The Hague and Paris: Mouton Press, 1974) pp 1-47.

[8] C.S. Lewis, A Preface to Paradise Lost (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1970) pp 13-32.

[9] Stephen Nichols, "The Spirit of Truth" in New Literary History Vol. 1 pp 372-376.

[10] Ibid., pp 380-384.

[11] Lewis, Preface pp 33-61.

[12] Tom Burns Haber, <u>A Comparative Study of Beowulf and the Aeneid</u> (Princeton, 1931)　　passim

[13]　Haber makes several noticeable errors in his study that show an inadequate treatment of native Anglo-Saxon literary tradition. By saying that Beowulf as a sailor is an un-Germanic hero, he ignores the whole elegaic tradition. His arguments that the burials are culled from the <u>Aeneid</u> is proven false by the evidence of Sutton Hoo etc. Nevertheless, the language used to describe these burials is definitely influenced by classical poetry, though the fact remains that the subject matter and approach are essentially Anglo-Saxon and not Latin.

[14] Margaret E, Goldsmith, <u>The Mode and Meaning of Beowulf</u> (London: Athlone Press, 1970) p 224

[15]　JRR, Tolkein "The Monsters and the Critics" in <u>An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism</u> edited by Lewis E Nicholson (London and Notre Dame: The University of Notre Dame Press, 1971) pp 51-103　　pp 54-56

[16]　Francis P Magoun, "The Oral-Formulaic Character of Anglo-Saxon Narrative Poetry" in Nicholson's <u>Anthology</u> pp 189-221　　passim

[17]　Wilson, <u>Theology and Poetry</u>　pp 10 and 11

[18]　Walter Morris Hart, <u>Ballad and Epic: A Study in the Development of the Narrative Art</u> ~~in~~ Studies and Notes in Philology and Literature　Vol 11 (Boston: Ginn and Co,,) 1907)　pp ?

knowledgeably worded.

[19] _The Elder Edda : A Selection_ translated by W H Auden and Paul B Taylor with introduction by Peter H Salus and Paul B. Taylor (New York : Vintage Books, 1970) pp 13-33

[20] Levin L Schüking "The Ideal of Kingship in _Beowulf_ " in Nicholson's _Anthology_ (pp 35-50) passim Yet this presentation of an ideal kingship embodied in Beowulf doesn't help to explain his tragic death , unless it stem from some sort of "tragic flaw" i.e. pride or greed. The poem can't really be read as an instruction manual or description of the ideal king because we never see Beowulf as a king doing his daily tasks , not often are kings expected to fight live dragons etc.

[21] R. E. Kaske , "Sapientia et Fortitudo as the Controlling Theme of _Beowulf_ in Nicholson's _Anthology_ (pp269-310) pp 279-310

[22] Hart, _Ballad & Epic_

[23] Ibid.

[24] H. L. Rogers "_Beowulf's Three Great Fights_" in Nicholson's _Anthology_ (pp 233-256) pp 248 and 249

[25] Tolkein , "The Monsters" pp 83 and 84

[26] Stanley B Greenfield , _A Critical History of Old English Poetry Literature_ (New York : NYU Press, 1969) pp 213 & 214

[27] Wilson, _Theology and Poetry_ pp 48-62

[28] Greenfield, _Critical History_ pp 215

Sensibly handled.

29 Wilson, _Theology and Poetry_   pp 63-85.

30 Ibid., pp 86-109.

31 Tolkein, "The Monsters"   pp 68-70.

32 The whole system is shown at its most violent and all the social bonds are revealed to be destructive in truth. For example, the notion of wergild is ^satirized twice, once by having Grendel's mother attempt to avenge her son's death and again by the father unable to forgive or punish his own son's murder of his brother. The legal system can't handle its own repercussions as violence breeds violence. It is interesting to note that all motives in the poem are tied to the comitatus/wergild medieval system, proving that it is the system that is being weighed and tested by the poet.

Aye.

33 Hrothgar's speech does come out of his elegaic experience and aged wisdom, but the Christian impact of it does point to the poet speaking through Hrothgar to air his own opinions. This speech has more Christian truth than any other in the poem and is outside Hrothgar's character of the impotent and beseiged old king, Hygelac's counterpart and Beowulf's foil.

34 The Motif of the watcher over the sea is frequent in the poem — note the two coast guards — and Beowulf's wakefulness is contrasted with the sleep of the others as Grendel stalks into Heorot. All these seem to play on "the Seafarer"'s theme of anxious lookingout as the ideal role for the sailor to play.

35 Goldsmith, _Mode and Meaning_   p 185   It is really impossible to footnote the ideas presented, in the past

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