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Title: The Christian Theme of *Beowulf*

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[(essay date 1960) In the following excerpt, Goldsmith contends that the story and symbolism of *Beowulf* are coherent only when the poem is given a Christian interpretation rather than a secular, pagan one; however, Goldsmith warns that the character Beowulf is not meant to be regarded as Christ-like.]

i

The poem *Beowulf* as we have it contains indisputably Christian sentiments and vocabulary, and handles familiarly and allusively certain Biblical stories. Yet there lingers a belief that these are extraneous trappings, that the feeling of the poem is essentially pagan, or at the best only half-heartedly Christian. I shall seek to show that it gains considerably in coherence and significance if we allow ourselves to be guided by the poet's own emphases in the choice and presentation of the stories and his moral reflections upon them. A literate Anglo-Saxon poet would in the normal course of things have learnt to read in a monastery, where his daily reading would be much on the Psalms and certain other parts of the Bible, and where his attitude to the meaning of meaning would be formed by the traditional exegetic methods of the homilists. To such a man, Cain, the giants, the dragons, would be historical realities and at the same time symbols of spiritual strife continually existing. On the secular plane, the poem falls apart, not merely into two scarcely related adventures with monsters, but into a number of fragmentary scraps which can only be accounted for as concessions to the fantastic weakness of the putative audience for 'digressions' or to the inability of the poet to restrain himself from going off at a tangent. Considered as a poem of ideas rather than of physical action, it has a pattern, a progression, and a purpose which explains the structure of the narrative.

There are certain false critical assumptions about the poem which do the poet some disservice.

First: that the hero Beowulf is the poet's ideal. Many notable scholars have convinced themselves that Beowulf is presented as the saviour of his people, like a Christian knight, or even like Christ himself, in spite of the fact that even in the final eulogy there is no hint of this. Beowulf is presented as a noble hero, but not as the complete paragon of kingly virtue. One can imagine a comparable Christian poem about King David: there would be much to praise in the hero, but no-one would suggest that his every act was held up for imitation by

the poet's patron.

Second: that the poet's beliefs can be identified with those which motivate his characters, in spite of the fact that he himself stands apart as commentator.

Third: that the poem only makes sense if one has learnt, from other sources, the unmentioned details or later consequences of the events described. From this assumption comes a good deal of unnecessary puzzlement. The tidy version of the stories, as sifted from the analogues by the editor, often looks much more remote from the argument of the poem than those features of the stories which the poet has chosen to recall. This is nowhere better illustrated than in the episode of Sigemund and Fitela (ll. 874-986), where the poet tells of a hero and his nephew who were comrades in many a battle with giants and in much human strife, though the uncle stood alone when he killed the great dragon and carried off its treasure in his ship. Loyalty and treachery among kin, giant-slaying, dragon-fights, treasure hoards, are all integral parts of what the poet is writing about, and these are the aspects of Sigemund's life-story which bear upon the tale of Beowulf as he has conceived it. The incestuous begetting of Fitela, the curse upon the Nibelung's treasure, are discarded, if known, as irrelevant here. By the same critical method one can reconstruct the Finn story so that it appears to be a lay in honour of the Danes, disregarding the ironic comparison between the pent-up passions (like the winter waves locked in the bond of ice) of the Danes forced to swear allegiance to Finn, and the concealed hatred which will destroy Hrothgar's family.

If we look at the story as the poet presents it, we shall remember the foreign queen Hildeburh when we learn of the betrothal of Freawaru, and recall the burning of Finnsburg when Beowulf reminds us of the unquenchable hatred between Ingeld's men and the followers of his bride. There are other and different purposes in the telling of this lay: the swift transition from the splendid description of the Scylding king's gifts to Beowulf to the glittering splendour of the gold on Hnaf's funeral pyre has the same effect as the sudden picture of devouring fire superimposed on the first account of the splendours of Heorot. The delayed revenge of Hengest may be recalled when Beowulf must take the throne from his lord's slayer, Onela. These and other links with the 'main plot' may easily be obscured if we concern ourselves with the quasi-historical puzzles of the Finn affair, on the assumption that the allusive method of writing demands much knowledge in the audience. The only demand on the listener, as I see it, is that he shall remember what has gone before in the poem. To our generation this is not easy, but this demand on the memory appears to be inherent in this kind of narrative technique, which constantly foreshadows coming events. Each thunderstorm is presaged by a cloud no bigger than a man's hand. A poet who adopts a method of this sort is likely to be a man who sees his work whole and chooses his effects with deliberation.

I believe that we have here a skilled Christian poet who has chosen to retell the story of a pre-Christian hero in such a way as to impart certain moral lessons. The danger of celebrating a pagan hero he has ingeniously avoided by giving his characters a pre-Christian setting, as if they had lived b.c. Like the Israelites of the Old Testament, they can be presented as servants of the Lord, under the moral obligations of the 'Old Law'. There were giants in the world of Genesis (c. 6, 4), enemies of God. There was divinely sanctioned blood-vengeance (c. 9, 5-6). There was strife between the kin of Cain and the men of God. Thus the whole Beowulf story of feuds between men and supernatural creatures, and amongst men, can without inconsistency be conceived as belonging to that primitive world, with its hero, like another Samson, as the (not immaculate) champion of God.

The poet quite evidently means to show that the strife with the Grendel kin is part of the uncompoundable feud between God's people and the race of Cain. Beowulf's victory in this strife is symbolized by the hilt of the giant-made sword which he used, with God's help, to behead the monsters. When the trophy of victory is examined in Heorot, it is seen to bear an engraving which depicts the antediluvian war between the giant-race and the Creator. This engraving is so unnecessary to the adventure story of Beowulf the Geat, and so essential

a part of the religious theme, that it makes a very significant pointer to the poet's conception of his work.

It must not be forgotten that the devil and his crew have their place in the Genesis-world. When Hrothgar is made to speak (in ll. 1740 ff.) of arrows of the devil which wound a man's soul while its guardian sleeps, his phrasing is Christian, but there is nothing anachronistic in the doctrine. The sin of pride, against which Hrothgar is warning the victorious hero, is older than Adam's fall.

If all the poet had done were to draw the poison from a heathen heroic lay, we should have to treat him as a reviser rather than a creative artist. But his work is not by any means of a negative kind. He has not only seen the adventures of Geatish Beowulf in a new perspective: he has joined them with other material, so as to compose a poem of a new kind, for which the name heroic elegy is the best so far found. He has woven in two themes: the theme of *dom* and the theme *sic transit gloria mundi*. Neither of these themes is in itself Christian: *Hávamál* is sufficient evidence to the contrary. If the poem were simply about the inevitability of death and decay, and the endurance of fame after death, God would have no necessary place in it, and Beowulf's piety would be incidental. Many scholars have looked at the poem like this. But they have been puzzled by one thing: why, with so many heroic stories at his command, did the poet choose Beowulf's fights with the Grendel kin and the dragon as the high points of his poem? I do not find any satisfactory answer to this, except the answer offered by Professor Tolkien, that the monsters, though indisputably living and breathing creatures, are symbolic of the powers of evil.

But I do not find the whole answer here. There are still awkward questions to be asked. What have Hrothgar's moral discourse and the dragon's cursed treasure to do with one another? Why, if Beowulf is the champion of good against evil in his last fight, does he not openly put his trust in God, as he does before the other fights?

We can offer solutions to these puzzles in two different ways. We can say that the poet, in reworking an older story, was content to leave some of the heathen motivation in the latter part, ignoring the discrepancies thus caused. Or we can argue that the poet knew his craft, and deliberately prepared for the nature and outcome of the last contest, using his common device of foreshadowing the future, in the scene of Hrothgar's warning to young Beowulf (ll. 1698-1784). The second way seems to be more in accord with our general assessment of the poet's qualities as narrator.

Most interpreters of the poem take no account of the change in Beowulf's character as it is revealed in the last section of the poem. We do not see the processes of change: we are confronted with old Beowulf, on whom time and success and worldly prosperity have left their mark, and we see middle-aged Beowulf only through his own reminiscent eyes. In the dragon affair we do not find the Beowulf of the Grendel fight. The old man is no less courageous, no less physically strong, but he is overcome, because he is arrogantly confident of his power to assay the contest unaided, and his expressed motives are worldly. Such a moral deterioration Hrothgar had foreseen. The ageing Beowulf is boastful of his previous successes, whereas the young champion was comparatively reticent (see his reply to Hygelac's invitation to recount what happened to Grendel, ll. 2093-6) and was careful to give the credit to God, and to include his companions in his first account of his exploit (l. 958). Old Beowulf parted from his thanes for the last time, spurning their help.

'Nis þat eower sið,
ne gemet mannes, nefne min anes . . .'
(ll. 2532-3)

The tragedy of Beowulf is more than a contrast between Youth and Age: Beowulf does not fall because he is old, but because *Sigora Waldend* is not with him.

The poem is not only about the hero Beowulf, and in what follows I have looked afresh at the narrative in the light of my two assumptions, that the poet was a man whose thinking was moulded by traditional Christian

teaching, and that the presentation of the stories is our best guide to his governing purpose. In the space available to me, I am forced to select only the most noteworthy instances of the poet's Christian teaching, but I am convinced that the treatment of the rest can be shown to support my general contentions.

ii

Consider the opening: up to l. 193 the hero does not appear at all. Why, we may ask, begin with Scyld? The usual explanation, to show the glory of the Danish dynasty, seems to miss the point. Almost half the lines concerning Scyld are descriptive of the treasure loaded upon his funeral ship. Not Scyld's mysterious childhood, not the great battles of his kingship, but the splendid futility of his funeral is what the poet dwells upon. The magnificent hoard sailed no man knows where, but Scyld went *on Frean wore* (l. 27). Pagan as Scyld was, no-one is to begin to think that he made a triumphant voyage to Valhalla. There is no anachronism here: the poet believes that God sent Scyld to the lordless Danes; into God's keeping he went. This passage is typical of the poet's handling of his pre-Christian heroes; God ruled them as he rules all men:

Metod eallum weold
gumena cynnes, swa he nu git deð.
(ll. 1057-8)

Whenever he has to tell of mysterious or supernatural happenings the poet repeats this affirmation, sometimes bluntly, as here, sometimes with great delicacy, as when the sword melting in the monster's poisonous blood is likened to the melting ice which the Father sets free from winter's bond (l. 1608), or when the unearthly light in the underwater cavern is likened to *rodore's candel*, so that the hearer is reminded of the Creator who

gesette sigehrepig sunnan ond monan,
leoman to leohte land-buendum.
(ll. 94-5)

The poet moves swiftly from Scyld's treasure-ship to Hrothgar's towering palace of Heorot, greatest monument to his worldly success. And at once he turns it to a blackened ruin before our eyes. It will be destroyed in the blaze kindled by a passion of hatred between the king and his son-in-law. We need no footnote on the Heathobard feud to explain the impact of this. It is enough that vengeful hatred will destroy this great work of men's hands, and that the hatred will spring up where there should be most loyalty. The story of Freawaru's marriage has its place in the narrative, but the poet is not so inept as to tell it here, when the stark facts of the splendour and the ruin make his point.

The hint of treachery and hatred is enough to lead into the Cain-theme which dominates the first part of the poem. Cain could not endure that his brother's worship was acceptable to God while his own was not: the Hymn of Creation sung by a Dane in Heorot rouses the same malicious envy in Grendel, one of Cain's brood. In the terror of Grendel's attacks, some Danes turn to the worship of idols: hell is in their hearts. The poet speaks with horror of their prospect of damnation, infinitely worse than the earthly ills which have driven them to this desperation (ll. 175-88).

Beowulf comes as a God-sent deliverer 'to cleanse Heorot'. Both he and Hrothgar acknowledge God's governance, and I find no difficulty in the fact that the hero uses proverbial expressions, such as 'Gað a wyrd swa hio scel' (l. 455). Only in the last part of the poem does Beowulf speak of Fate without speaking also of God's control of Fate, and this is in keeping with my contention that the old king has lost his trust in God. I see no reason to suppose that the *poet's* view of *wyrd* would differ from that of Boethius. The Alfredian version of the *De Consolatione Philosophio* shows the English Christian's way of using the old word *wyrd*:

Ðat ðatte we hataþ Godes foreþonc and his foresceawung . . . siððan
hit fullfremed bið, ðonne hataþ we hit *wyrd*.

The next event in the narrative is Unferth's challenge and Beowulf's reply. This interchange reveals more than the story of the swimming-match. Unferth's envy makes an attempt to stir up strife, but Beowulf is not roused to offer him violence, in spite of the provocation. This unaggressive quality of the mighty hero is a part of his character stressed by the poet, nowhere more than in his funeral dirge:

Cwædon þat he wære
Manna mildust ond monþwarust.
(ll. 3180-1)

Though we see him in the grip of righteous wrath when he pitilessly destroys Grendel and his dam, we are also in sundry ways made aware that he is not a man governed by passion or a fighter for the love of fighting. The brief mention of his despised boyhood (ll. 2184-8) I believe to be retained from the old tale to reinforce this impression that Beowulf was not by nature savage and wild. His reluctance to fight without good cause earned him the reputation of cowardice, until he had proved himself in his early monster-fights. The contrast which is made between him and Heremod is in part a contrast between the hero whose mind controls his mighty strength and the strong man who misuses his great gift because he cannot govern his passions (ll. 1711-19).

The interchange with Unferth also reveals the nature of this trusted counsellor of King Hrothgar. Beowulf's retort makes the accusation that Unferth has killed his own brother. It can hardly be accidental that the sins of Cain—envy and the murder of kin—are thus disclosed as an evil within Heorot. A little later we infer that the same evil is a canker in the heart of Hrothulf (ll. 1018-19) and that this will cause the death of the sons of Hrothgar.

Concerning the Grendel-fight, I would only observe that Beowulf trusted in God (ll. 685-7) and God gave him victory (ll. 696-7) over his superhuman foe, who would gladly have fled from him to hide himself amidst a concourse of demons (l. 756).

After the victory comes a time of gaiety, when songs and lays are sung by the Danes. It is in the choice of these entertainments, which are not dictated by the action of the Beowulf story, that we ought to discern very clearly what was in the poet's mind. I have already spoken above of the Sigemund lay. The poet draws the threads together very skilfully here: Sigemund's dragon-treasure loaded in the bosom of his ship is not only to be recalled when Beowulf learns of *his* dragon and its hoard; it also has a function here to recall, in the scene of Beowulf's triumph, that other treasure-laden ship which carried dead Scyld away. The lay of Sigemund brings in a lay of Heremod, whose early fame was like Sigemund's, whose promise as a prince was like Beowulf's, but who later brought sorrow to his people and met a miserable death through treachery. Just as earlier the poet threw a shadow over Heorot, he now ends the fêting of Beowulf with the harsh, terse comment on Heremod: *hine fyren onwod* (l. 915). Beowulf is his people's hope, as young Heremod was, and even more beloved (l. 915). What will Beowulf's end be?

It is usually said that Heremod's rôle in the poem is 'to serve as a foil to the exemplary Beowulf'. The poem is treated as a jigsaw puzzle, with a few missing pieces, and the commentator rearranges it so as to produce a pattern of his own devising. Here a neat chiasmus is proposed: Heremod's early promise, Heremod's wretched death, contrasted with Beowulf's glorious end, following his despised youth. But this is not the contrast the poet makes. When Beowulf's 'slothful' boyhood is mentioned (l. 2187) there is nothing to bring Heremod to our minds. When King Hrothgar uses the example of Heremod in his moral discourse, it is as a warning to young Beowulf, who has yet to prove himself as king (ll. 1722-4).

After the Heremod lay has been sung by the Danish *scop*, there comes a thanksgiving to God for their deliverance, and then preparations for a feast. The poet, thinking of Grendel trying to run away from death as he made tracks for the hellish pool, offers one of those serious comments which are so often taken as

melancholic asides, or even as interpolations, touched off by the action but bearing no direct relevance to it:

No þat yðe byð
to befleonne—fremme se þe wille—
ac gesecan sceal sawlberendra
nyde genyðde, niþða bearna,
grundbuendra gearwe stowe
þar his lichoma legerbedde fast
swefeþ after symle.
(ll. 1002-8)

The sentiment of the sleep of death after the feast of life is commonplace; the poet's skill lies in the use he has made of it. From Grendel vainly running from death over the wastes we have been brought back to the comfort of Heorot, where the Danes are celebrating, with a feast, *their* escape from death. But after that feast, Æschere is killed, and even when the avenging monster is overcome, death still waits for the Scyldings in the smiling face of Hrothulf: hence the lines

Nalles facenstafas
þeod-Scyldingas þenden fremedon.
(ll. 1018-19)

At the feast, Beowulf and the Geats are royally rewarded for their valour, but the poet reminds us that it was God who used Beowulf's courage to end the reign of terror (ll. 1056-7). Hrothgar pays *wergild* for the Geat whom Grendel slew (ll. 1053-5). The death of the man devoured before Beowulf's eyes has been a stumbling-block to many students of the poem, since it seems a blemish on the hero. This episode was, I suppose, a feature of the older story which the poet did not want to reject, because it makes Grendel's savagery actual and immediate in the fight scene. He is not troubled that Beowulf may be thought a little less of on this account, but I think he may have been concerned lest his audience should question why God stayed his hand. Hence he follows this passage of reflection on Grendel's final attack with a passage more openly didactic than he usually permits himself:

Forþan bið andgit aghwar selest,
ferhðes foreþanc.
(ll. 1059-60)

As this appears in the translations, it seems to be an irrelevant platitude, if indeed it makes any sense at all. *Andgit* and *foreþanc* have meaning here only if we know how they were used by Anglo-Saxon churchmen. *Andgit* is the best of man's faculties: it translates the Psalmist's *intellectus*, the God-given intelligence by which man can know God. Ælfric makes St. Agnes say, 'Se geleafa ne bið on gearum, ac bið on glawum andgitum'. *Foreþanc* is the word used of God's Providence (see above), though here it means the human counterpart: 'provision (for the soul)'. Men must understand that God permits evil-doing, and allows both good and ill to come to men, but he is *witig* (l. 1056): he sees and governs all. Sudden death may be in store for any man; it is not for him to question God's will, but to look to the future of his soul.

The Danes enjoy their respite from fear, untroubled for the first time for many years. The feast is followed by song, and we hear the lay of Finn, a tale of treachery and sudden slaughter, its relevance to the court of Hrothgar brought home by the irony of Queen Wealhtheow's speech, in which she speaks of her son's future and her trust in Hrothulf's loyalty. Once more the end of the story of Heorot is foreshadowed, more subtly this time, by the use of an analogous tale.

We turn from the puzzles of the Finn episode to the puzzle of the four lines devoted to Hama. As I read the lines, Hama is shown as a robber who repented: having possessed himself of the most precious necklace in the world, he gave it up for the lasting good of 'treasure in heaven'—*geceas ecne rad* (l. 1201). Not so King

Hygelac, to whom his loyal nephew Beowulf gave the wonderful necklace which he had received from Hrothgar. The necklace was about Hygelac's throat when he was slain in Frisia, trying to defend the plunder he had set off in his pride to win.

Hyne wyrd fornam
syþðan he for wlenco wean ahsode
fahðe to Frysum.
(ll. 1206-7)

By means of this passage, the poet turns the listeners' thoughts from envious contemplation of Beowulf's rich rewards to the contemplation of that same gold ripped by the despoilers from dead Hygelac's breast. Hama chose the lasting good; Hygelac courted death for the sake of more wealth, only to leave to his enemies his costly adornment, and to his people a legacy of bitter enmity. We have the evidence of Hrothgar's sermon, the reiteration of the fall of Hygelac, and the manner of Beowulf's own death, to substantiate this interpretation. If the poet's purpose were only to remind us of the transience of human splendour, there would be no need to show, as he does, the human motives which underlie the ruin of Heorot and the overthrow of the Geats.

After the feasting, the men of Heorot sleep. Their pitiful preparedness does not save Æschere when the second monster revives the feud that night. So Beowulf is asked to carry vengeance to a place that sounds like an Anglo-Saxon Christian's idea of the very mouth of hell. He accepts the duty unhesitatingly:

Ure aghwylc sceal ende gebidan
worolde lifes; wyrce se þe mote
domes ar deape; þat bið drihtguman
unlifgendum after selest.
(ll. 1386-9)

This sentiment would not be out of place in a wholly heathen context, but we cannot fail to be reminded of the very similar words in *The Seafarer*, where the ideal of earthly glory is merged with the hope of heavenly reward for the hero. Both poets agree that the best life for a man is a life spent fighting in the unending feud against the devil and all the enemies of God,

deorum dadum deofle togeanes.
(*Seafarer*, l. 76)

In this spirit Beowulf fights, with *dom* as his reward—not only the earthly fame symbolized by the barrow on Hronesness, but *soðfastra dom*; the heavenly judgement of his deserts among all the just souls. In this unending fight, the hero's strongest weapon is faith.

Beowulf realizes this truth in the moment of crisis in the underwater chamber, when the sword Hrunting, lent him by Unferth, fails him in his need. He casts it from him, and trusts once more in his God-given strength. When he ceases to care for his own life and puts all his strength into the struggle, God comes to his aid, and he is victorious. He leaves the pool cleansed of its evil and returns to Heorot with his trophies, Grendel's head and the giant sword-hilt.

This palace-scene asks for special attention because, like the lays we have discussed, it is not required by the movement of the plot, and its length suggests its importance to its creator. Note first Beowulf's humility; he gives the credit for his victory to God:

oftost wisode
winigea leasum.
(ll. 1663-4)

Hrothgar is given the sword-hilt to examine, and we learn the significance of the engraved design, the design of the giant-feud, which I have already discussed. Because of the previous emphasis on Grendel's origin, we perceive that Beowulf's fights have been a small part of this Holy War. But the devil, whose servants he has overcome, will not withdraw from the contest, as old King Hrothgar clearly sees. So far Beowulf has borne his might and his fame wisely, acknowledging the source of his strength. But, while he praises him for this, King Hrothgar warns the young man to take heed of the example of King Heremod, to whom God gave like strength, and then power over men. As king, Heremod failed to govern himself: 'Learn by this', says the wise old king to Beowulf. And then, as if to still any murmurs of dissent, he speaks at length of the special dangers that await the man whom God has given wisdom, royal rank, a land to govern. To that man, prosperity may prove a worse enemy than fierce assailants. When he thinks himself safe from his enemies, he forgets that earthly life and power are short-lived, and a great arrogance and a desire for worldly splendour grow within him. Thus the arrows of the devil pierce his unguarded heart. When he dies, his power is at an end, and his hoarded wealth passes into other hands.

Bebeorh þe ðone bealonið, Beowulf leofa,
secg betsta, ond þe þat selre geceos,
ece radas; oferhyda ne gym,
mare cempa!
(ll. 1758-61)

This wisdom Hrothgar has learnt from his own chastening experience with Grendel. He knows that two paths lie before young Beowulf: one leads to *ece radas*, the eternal reward (which Hama chose); the other, to pride in possession of this world's solaces, and spiritual decline. Above all, the triumphant hero must guard himself against the sin of pride: *ofer-hyda ne gym*.

The significance of this sermon is slowly unfolded in what follows. We have been told already that King Hygelac of the Geats will die in his pride as he seeks for more wealth. The Geat people, like the Scyldings, will suffer misery, but their disaster springs from different causes. The Scyldings' ruin will come about through envy and murderous hatred among those who should be most loyal to Hrothgar: the spirit of Grendel still darkens Heorot. Gradually we learn what is in store for the Geats; bit by bit the causes of the smouldering enmity of the Swedes and Frisians and Franks are made known, so that we become aware that only the might of the Geatish king stands between his people and subjugation by their foes. We remember the plight of the lordless Danes before God took pity on them (ll. 14-16), and we remember Hrothgar's words to Beowulf in the last part of his homily (ll. 1769-81), in which he speaks of his own chastening reversal of fortune. The first part of the poem comes to an end with Beowulf enthroned beside his uncle Hygelac, modest, loyal, sagacious (he foresees the failure of the Heathobard marriage pact), covered with honours and praised by all. Hrothgar's words have prepared us for Beowulf's later coronation, and also for the hero's trial to come, where the enemy is the devil, and one of his weapons worldly success. Beowulf's spirit is too noble to fall into the grosser sins of a Heremod, as the poet obviously means to emphasize in his lines on Beowulf's character (ll. 2177-88). But Hrothgar too was a good and noble king until the long years of having his own way made him careless of spiritual well-being. It needed the coming of Grendel to make him aware of his actual weakness.

It is with no surprise, therefore, that we find ourselves lifted across fifty years in a few lines (l. 2200 ff.), to see Beowulf placed in the position of Hrothgar when Grendel made his first attack. After many years of prosperous rule, his peace is broken by an invading monster.

Whether the dragon is symbolic of anything or nothing has been much debated. One argument asks a kind of sympathy for the outraged dragon, who 'is nowhere called God's enemy, or a fiend, or joyless; in fact no words of moral disapprobation are applied to him'. This R.S.P.C.A. attitude, which in the past has also embraced Grendel's dam, would, I am sure, be incomprehensible to the Anglo-Saxon Christian. The malice of the dragon

is something very different from the righteous wrath of a man who has been robbed. Before he has made the mound his home, he is called *eald uht-sceaða* and *nacod nið-draca*; he holds the countryside in terror (ll. 2274-5). He is not called 'joyless', because he is not, like Grendel, corroded with hopeless desire for the comfortable life of men from which he is cast out. He finds his satisfaction in possessing his hoard and in the terror and suffering that he can cause. The dragon, like Grendel, is essentially malicious, essentially a destroyer.

It is impossible to be precise about the degree of symbolism involved in the poet's conception of the dragon and Grendel. It is certain that they are not abstractions or fictional creatures: water-trolls and fire-breathing dragons were part of popular belief. Trolls eat people and dragons lie upon gold. The Christian poet accepted these creatures as part of God's world, because he had in Genesis an explanation of their origin, and he has been very careful to recount that origin in the case of Grendel. Why is there no comparable explanation of the dragon? Surely because *wyrm* and *draca* are recognizably creatures of hell in Christian lore? The OE poem of *Genesis* also has a *wyrm*: this is the disguise of the Tempter in the Garden of Eden. In the Latin Bible the dragon and serpent are interchangeable symbols for the devil. See what Bede thought of dragons, in his commentary upon the Book of the Apocalypse: in c. 20, 2, the Bible has *Et apprehendit draconem serpentum antiquum*. Bede's note is: *Draco ergo, propter nocendi malitiam: Serpens, propter fallendi astutiam*. The dragon is an appropriate image of the devil because of his malice. Note also that Bede's comment on c. 12, 9, *Et projectus est draco ille magnus in terram . . .*, begins: *Antiquus hostis de spiritualibus expulsus, arctius in terrenos includitur*. The *Beowulf* poet uses the English equivalent of *antiquus hostis*, i.e. *eald-gewinna*, of Grendel (l. 1776): Bede regards it as an alternative for *draco ille magnus*. This in itself would suggest that there is no fundamental difference of attitude towards the two monsters. I have no doubt that the poet and his audience would share Bede's opinion of the essential nature of a *draca* or *wyrm*, and would be familiar with this monster as a shape of the devil and his henchmen.

Only if we refuse to admit that the *Beowulf* dragon is a Christian's dragon can we be confused into thinking that he is not God's enemy, as much as, and more than, Grendel is. The poet has added his Christian lore about these creatures to the commonly received pre-Christian beliefs about them. It would be absurd to suppose that he sub-divided the *genus draco* in his mind into Biblical species and Germanic species. In Germanic folk-lore, dragons lust after gold, they are covetous and *fratwum wlanc*, though gold is useless to them. In Christian legend, the devil is seen as a serpent or dragon: his sin is arrogance. We have seen how the sins of the Danish court were reflected in Grendel: is it no more than coincidence that Hygelac the Geat died through pride and lust for gold? We have been warned in Hrothgar's sermon that as a successful king Beowulf would face the temptation of thinking himself self-sufficient:

him eal worold
wendeð on willan; he þat wyrse ne con—
oð þat him on innan oferhygda dal
weaxeð ond wridað . . .
(ll. 1738-41)

So it was with Satan before his fall. Young Beowulf was humble and not covetous—he did not desire Grendel's gold, nor did he keep back for himself anything of the royal rewards he gained in Heorot. But observe how, in Hrothgar's sermon, the prosperous ruler's growing pride and disregard of conscience gave the devil his opportunity to prompt him to further sin:

þinceð him to lytel, þat he lange heold,
gytsað grom-hydig.
(ll. 1748-9)

So spoke Hrothgar of his hypothetical ruler, who becomes fiercely covetous of yet more wealth. Yet, lift that last phrase from its context, and it might equally well form part of the description of Beowulf's dragon,

savagely lusting after new treasure. This desire for wealth is one aspect of the evil Beowulf has to fight. The arrogance of Satan is the greater evil which menaces him: '*oferhyda ne gym, mare cempa!*' The dragon does not conquer him, but it is a mortal struggle, and he does not win alone. As Hrothgar needed his help, he will need Wiglaf's.

It is unfortunate that some details of the dragon story are uncertain because of damage to the manuscript. We can, however, be sure that some Geat—*secg syn-bysig*—entered the dragon's mound unwittingly, when in need of a refuge from *hete-swengeas*. Finding himself in a treasure-chamber, he seizes a jewelled goblet, and makes off with it, apparently because with it he can buy his life. (So, Beowulf's father Ecgtheow fled from his home after killing a man, and later bought peace with treasure sent on his behalf by Hrothgar.) The thief's petition is granted, and his lord receives the goblet:

frea sceawode
fira fyrngeweorc forman siðe.
(ll. 2285-6)

It is not stated whether this *frea* is Beowulf or another. A hundred and twenty lines later, another terse statement, which certainly refers to Beowulf, tells us—

him to bearme cwom
maðþumfat mare þurh ðas meldan hond.
(ll. 2404-5)

The *melda* is his informant; whether he is one and the same as the thief is unclear. The implication of Beowulf in the consequences of the theft is more reasonable if we suppose that he was in fact the receiver of the stolen cup. Whatever the details of the affair, Beowulf eventually keeps the goblet.

The dragon's rage on discovering the theft is terrible; he can scarcely wait for vengeance. The poet makes the curious observation, *apropos* the danger the thief was in when he crept by the dragon's head:

Swa mag unfage eaðe gedigan
wean ond wracsið se ðe Waldendes
hylde gehealdeþ.
(ll. 2291-3)

The force of this is only seen if we look forward once more to the time when Beowulf nears the dragon. The thief was saved in his moment of peril because God was with him, sinner though he was. Beowulf faced the dragon's fire without *Waldendes hylde*:

wende se wisa, þat he Wealdende
ofer ealde riht ecean Dryhtne
bitre gebulge; breost innan weoll
þeostrum geþoncum, swa him geþywe ne was.
(ll. 2329-32)

Beowulf took the dragon's visitation as God's chastisement. It should be noted that the thief's motives mitigate his sin. He made no attempt to enrich himself from the hoard, though he was destitute and a fugitive. The dragon did not molest him. Beowulf, on the other hand, challenged the dragon with these parting words to his thanes:

'Nis þat eower sið,
ne gemet mannes, nefne min anes,
þat he wið aglacean eofoðe dale,
eorlscype efne. Ic mid elne sceall

gold gegangan, oððe guð nimeð
feorhbealu frecne frean eowerne!
(ll. 2532-7)

Beowulf, like Hygelac before him, was tainted with the sins of the dragon, arrogance and love of treasure. Before the earlier monsterfights, he committed himself to God. This time, he boasts to his men that he alone will win the gold. When he faced Grendel, the poet told us

Huru Geata leod georne truwode
modgan magnes Metoddes hylde.
(ll. 669-70)

Like the thief, he trusted then in *Methodes hylde*. When he came to face the dragon—

strengo getruwode
anes mannes; ne bið swylc earges sið.
(ll. 2340-1)

The variation is significant. Old Beowulf was still brave, but bravery is no substitute for *Methodes hylde* in such a fight.

What was this 'heathen gold' which Beowulf gave his life to win? It was the piled-up wealth of a dead people. I do not think any reader of the Bible could hear the 'Lay of the Last Survivor', or the description of the treasure hoard as Wiglaf saw it, tarnished and rusty, without being reminded of the lines from St. Matthew's Gospel, 6, 19: *Nolite thesaurizare vobis thesauros in terra, ubi aerugo et tinea demolitur, et ubi fures effodiunt et furantur; thesaurizate autem vobis thesauros in calo . . .* It does not appear to me likely that our poet would have effected this resemblance coincidentally, in view of the pattern of thought which now emerges. Christ's admonition here is the ultimate source of the earnest advice given by King Hrothgar:

'Bebeorh þe ðone bealonið, Beowulf leofa,
secg betsta, ond þe þat selre geceos,
ece radas.'
(ll. 1758-60)

Thesaurizate thesauros in calo is but another way of saying *geceos ece radas*, and the evil Beowulf must shun is that of lusting after earthly wealth. With his usual astonishing sense of what is historically fitting, the poet has not given Hrothgar the actual words of Christ, but his use of this admonition, together with the rust on the treasure and the thief breaking in, leaves me with no doubt that this gospel passage was in his mind throughout the poem. It provides a key to our understanding of the matter of the buried treasure, and it is a key which the poet's postulated audience would not need to seek. Constantly, from the Scyld prelude to the pyre of Beowulf, the poet uses gold as a setting for death and destruction; constantly, in the last part of the poem, he warns us that no good comes from buried treasure. Because of this buried hoard, death will come upon Beowulf's people. The poet sums up this belief just after his prophecy of the downfall of the Geats (ll. 3028-30). First he gives another description of the treasures, *omige*, *Purhetone*, and a mention of the curse on them which God alone could circumvent. Then he says:

Þa was gesyne, þat se sið ne ðah
þam þe unrihte inne gehydde
wrote under wealle.
(ll. 3058-60)

To the Christian poet, the burial of gold is not only futile, it is actually *unrihte*, for it goes directly against

Christ's command, *Nolite thesaurizare [v.l. condere] vobis thesauros in terra.*

Thus the poet has taken the legend of cursed heathen gold and turned it to his purpose. His intention in the lines I have discussed is plain; his handling of the curse itself reads awkwardly, as if he were not sure himself what power of evil incantatory spells might hold. One thing is certain, that God holds this evil power in check if He so wills. The corollary is that He allowed it to compass Beowulf's death, though the hellish torments the curse places on the despoiler did not fall upon him or upon the other Geats who touched the hoard. This is not to say that Beowulf's death was caused by a blind fate, in spite of the fact that Wiglaf and the king himself sometimes speak as though it were. Wiglaf says of Beowulf, for example:

heold on heah-gesceap.
(l. 3084)

But that this is a manner of speaking rather than a philosophical statement is clear from the context. This is the closing line of his speech beginning:

Oft sceall eorl monig anes willan
wrac adreogan, swa us geworden is.
(ll. 3077-8)

He implies that Beowulf acted wrongly. The difference between the Christian and heathen outlook on Fate is this: the Christian believes that a man is responsible for his acts, whatever the circumstances. The Geats' distress was caused *anes willan*, by Beowulf's choice of strife with the dragon for the sake of the gold. Had he not desired to win this gold, the curse would not have touched him. I think this may be what the poet is trying to say in the couplet which ends the account of the horrors of the curse (ll. 3074-5) though it would be hazardous to build any argument on a passage so obscure. All I would remark is that the sentence as it stands does not preclude such an interpretation, and there is no need to assume any special contextual meanings (as is often done) *unless* we are trying to exculpate Beowulf. Shorn of its complications, the sentence appears to read:

Nas he . . . gearwor hafde . . . est ar gesceawod
(ll. 3074-5)

The verb *sceawian* has been used previously of the lord's gazing upon the stolen cup (l. 2285), and the same combination of *gearo* and *sceawian* is used of Beowulf's dying eagerness to look upon the buried treasure. He says to Wiglaf:

Bio nu on ofoste, þat is arwelan
goldaht ongite, gearo sceawige
swegle searogimmas, þat ic ðy seft mage
after maððumwelan min alatan
lif ond leodscipe, þone ic longe heold.
(ll. 2747-51)

Since *est*, used concretely, normally means 'a mark of favour', 'a gift', it seems to me reasonable to interpret this *agendes est* (l. 3075) as 'the gift of the possessor', i.e. the stolen cup which first roused Beowulf's desire to win the dragon's hoard. The doubtful adjective *gold-hwate*, 'rich in gold', appropriately describes this *maþPumfat mare* which came into Beowulf's possession; *ar* would then refer to the first occasion on which he saw the cup. We are left with the logical puzzle of *nas . . . gearwor*, 'not at all more readily'; I should like to interpret this as marking the contrast between Beowulf's reluctant acceptance of the stolen cup and his later eagerness to examine the buried board. The context of the curse apart then, I would regard the following as a likely rendering: 'Very much less readily before had he looked upon the gold-encrusted gift of the possessor'. But if it be argued that the postulated connexion between *agendes est* and the stolen cup is too tenuous, we are

driven to taking *est* in some vaguer sense, as some previous 'mark of favour' given to Beowulf. I should still consider the two lines a virtual statement that Beowulf had sought this cursed hoard more eagerly than he had sought other treasure in the past. Putting these two lines into their context, we have a sequence: that no man knows where he will meet death; Beowulf did not know the cause of his death; did not know there was a curse on the treasure when he sought the dragon fight, desiring that treasure more than other treasures he had looked upon. This is coherent, whereas the usual view, that the last two lines stress Beowulf's *lack* of covetousness, provides us with a malign curse, falling, *with God's approval*, on Beowulf's *innocent* head.

The curse, as I see it, is retained to symbolize the evil power of hoarded gold. This interpretation gives point to the otherwise gratuitous

Sinc eaþe mag
gold on grunde gumcynnes gehwone
oferhigian.
(ll. 2764-6)

It also brings the curse into line with Hrothgar's homily. It must not be suggested that Beowulf died in mortal sin. I take it that the dragon fight, in which he was slain in slaying the monster, represents the struggle with temptation, so often described in saints' lives in terms of a physical contest. After the fight, his soul leaves his body:

secean soðfastra dom.
(l. 2820)

The word *soðfast* translates the Vulgate Latin *justus*, the righteous man, and the phrase used here appears to be the equivalent of the Patristic Latin *justorum iudicium*. Beowulf has lived most of his life according to the *eald riht*, and though he falls short of Christian ideals, he goes after death as a good man to judgement, not, like an Unferth, to damnation. The gold the hero gave his life for lies useless in the ground, but his noble life has won him the hope of eternal reward.

There is a great deal more in the latter half of the poem, but it is all subordinated to the theme of the treasure which is Beowulf's bane and the cause of the overthrow of the Geats. Two passages stand out from the 'historical' matter. One is the description of the death of Hrethel's heir and the old man's heart-break. The other is Wiglaf's condemnation of the cowardly retainers.

The first of these passages has been admirably discussed by Professor Whitelock, who shows the point of departure of the simile in which Hrethel's grief is compared with that of an old man whose son is hanged. The extension of the simile seems to ask for other explanation. It rouses an emotion which will be transferred to old Beowulf, who grieves as he faces death that he has no son to whom he could pass on his rich possessions. There may be some bitterness in Beowulf's last words on Hrethel:

eaferum lafde, swa deð eadig mon,
lond ond leodbyrig, þa he of life gewat.
(ll. 2470-1)

Beowulf himself has no *eafera* to cherish what he has won. The poet has seized upon the historical event of King Hrethel's decline after the death of his eldest son to elaborate upon the human desolation of the man who has no use for his riches. Hrethel ceased to take delight in the comforts of this world:

gumdream ofgeaf, Godes leoht geceas.
(ll. 2469)

There is a hint in the choice of these words describing his death, that Hrethel may have found a higher consolation when human joy was denied him. The ultimate effect of the whole passage is to increase our sense of the futility of amassing earthly wealth, even for the sake of passing it on to a son.

The other passage I mentioned, the condemnation of the retainers who fled, at first sight seems to bear little relation to the themes I have been discussing. Yet even this conventional and obviously unavoidable part of the story has been made to bear upon the poet's chief preoccupations. The men whose loyalty Beowulf has bought with rings and weapons turn and flee when they see him being worsted. Only Wiglaf will risk his life for his lord, for there is for him the greater bond of kinship:

Sibb afre ne mag
wiht onwendan þam þe wel þenceð.
(ll. 2600-1)

This is the obverse of the story of Heorot, where men plot the murder of their kin. Wiglaf does not think of his own possible advancement if Beowulf dies. His love and loyalty sustain Beowulf, and together they overcome the dragon.

The poem ends with the king's funeral rites and the committal of the hard-won treasure to the earth:

eldum swa unnyt, swa hit aror was.
(ll. 3167-8)

As his memorial is raised, his followers sing a lament in which Beowulf's deeds are praised. They celebrate his mildness and gentleness and his desire for fame. This is a very odd epitaph for a Germanic warrior, yet it is in keeping with the poet's view of the hero (in ll. 2177-83). It befits the old man who could boast in his last hour:

ne sohte searoniðas,
(ll. 2738)

and who rejoiced that God could not reproach him with the slaying of kinsmen (ll. 2741-2). That he has *not* murdered any of his family seems a curiously negative virtue for the old king to take pride in: the only reason for the insistence appears to be the poet's obsession with Cain, the fratricide.

It is important to realize that to Bede, and hence, most certainly, to the *Beowulf* poet, Cain was more than the first murderer and the progenitor of giants. Bede explains:

Sicut ab initio seculi incipientis in occisione Abel passiones sanctorum; in livore autem et persecutione Cain perfidia sunt insinuata reprobatorum, qua ad finem usque saculi erunt amba in mundo permansura; sic et in civitate quam edificavit Cain typice intimidabatur, quod spes tota pravorum in hujus saculi regno esset ac felicitate figenda, ut pote qui futurum bonorum aut fidem aut desiderium nullum haberent.

Cain typifies the wicked, who cause the innocent to suffer. The wicked, the race of Cain, build their cities in this world because all their hope lies here: they have no faith in *ece radas*.

Thus the two halves of the poem come together in one. 'Treasure upon earth' is the desire of the followers of Cain, and envy, treachery, and killing attend its satisfaction. Hrothgar, forgetting his mortality in the pride of his palace, is no less a part of the Cain-motive than Unferth killing his brother or Hrothulf scheming to gain the throne. Hrothgar, chastened by Grendel's visitation, warns Beowulf against coveting the glory and wealth of this world. Beowulf's temptation takes symbolic shape in the dragon's cursed treasure, for which the king, in his pride, would have given his life in vain, had it not been for Wiglaf, who rated the love of kin higher than

his own life.

The poem was obviously not composed as an allegory, in the way that *Piers Plowman* was composed. The stories existed, and the poet, I believe, saw symbolic significance in them, which he has pointed and elaborated by his manipulation of the tales. He has treated the story of heathen Beowulf as an exegete might have treated, say, the story of Samson, by drawing a moral lesson from the hero's deeds. Above all, in his treatment of the 'digressions' he has concentrated his listeners' thoughts on certain aspects of the cleansing of Heorot and the burial of the treasure, so as to emphasize, not just a morbid sense of decay and doom, but his faith in the greater good of lasting wealth, the wealth of the spirit. In this respect *Beowulf* seems to me no different in intention from the other Old English elegies we have. The chief inspiration of such poems is ultimately the Psalms.

Besides the Psalms, the poet obviously had in mind some of the teachings of Gregory and Augustine. A Gregorian source has been argued for Hrothgar's homily, and others have seen the influence of Augustine in the portrayal of the virtues of the ruler. The theme of the whole poem as I have outlined it is Augustinian in spirit; the ultimate source may be found in St. Paul's First Epistle to Timothy. Some phrases from this epistle have become proverbial, though their context is less well known. Together, in c. 6, we find three thoughts which seem to me the essence of the doctrine the poet wished to bring home:

Radix enim omnium malorum est cupiditas, quam quidem appetentes erraverunt a fide et inseruerunt se doloribus multis.

(v. 10)

Certa bonum certamen fidei, apprehende vitam aeternam.

(v. 12)

Divitibus huius mundi non sublime sapere neque sperare in incerto divitiarum, sed in Deo vero . . . bene agere, divites fieri in bonis operibus . . . thesaurizare sibi fundamentum bonum in futurum, ut apprehendant veram vitam.

(v. 17)

Paul sees the good man as a fighter in the war against evil, who by freeing himself from *cupiditas* lays up for himself heavenly treasure. I suggest that the *Beowulf* poet saw, in the legendary life of a heathen hero, an opportunity to write of this fight against the devil and the seed of Cain. In the strife which forms the background of the story, he saw the sins of Cain still causing suffering to the innocent; in the gold of Heorot and the buried treasure, he saw the hope and achievement of those who, like Cain, have no faith in a future good; in the monsters, he saw the embodiment of the evils which the devil has let loose upon the world. So, in the heroic tragedy of *Beowulf*, he showed his audience that many of the old Germanic virtues might be used in the service of God, in that unending feud which began before Adam was created.

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