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THE BEOWULF POET

A COLLECTION OF CRITICAL ESSAYS

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could depart from the one God to other service in time of trial—precisely because that God has never guaranteed to His servants immunity from temporal calamity, before or after prayer. It is to idols that men turned (and turn) for quick and literal answers.

The Style and Structure of *Beowulf*

by Joan Blomfield *

The unity of *Beowulf* has long been taken for granted, but the sure construction of the poem has only of late been wholeheartedly affirmed.¹ Discrepancies and weaknesses which have puzzled earlier critics now begin to fall into their rightful places in a scheme of poetic conception with its own values. I do not attempt to probe these underlying values, but rather to indicate how they emerge in the plan and method of the poem. It is unfortunate that *Beowulf* is in many ways unique. Since no other poem of sufficient scope on the full heroic plan has survived, only in *Beowulf* can we follow the crystallization of structural processes in style and observe the features that certain modes of thought produce in each.

The setting out of the material is not in *Beowulf* an evolution, following one main line or connecting thread. Instead, the subject is disposed as a circumscribed field in which the themes are drawn out by a centre of attraction—in this case, the character of the good warrior. Far-flung tales and allusions, apparently scattered material and disconnected events are grouped in a wide sweep around the hero's character. In fact, these *are* his character, and their significance in the poem consists in this particular relation: by comparison we are shown Beowulf's nature, by searchlights into the past and future we are to sense the magnitude and true import of his

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¹ Most notably by Professor Tolkien (*Beowulf: the Monsters and the Critics*, British Academy, 1956). His remarks on structure (especially pp. 84-88) contain the substance of almost everything I would wish to say. But this aspect of the poem has in general received so little attention that there seems to be room still for detailed exposition.

achievements. From this periphery he draws his substance and reality. By these means he lives and his destiny impregnates the whole poem. The good warrior is displayed as a being consummated through all phases of his life and in all aspects of his character. The whole progress from adventurous youth to wisdom-weighted old age, many discreet elements—the bear-warrior strength, the knightly courtesy, vanity beside humility, and so on—are comprehended in this static unity. It has often been observed that there is no development of plot or character. The concluding state of affairs must be implicit in the beginning. With such a plan, a pre-ordained course of events, familiar topics, and stock situations are essential for the achievement of depth and scope. Not by transitions and transformations but by suggestion of the ever-present identity of seed in fruit and fruit in seed does the poet adjust the emotional tension. The reference to the burning of Heorot woven into the description of its first glories, and the forecast of family strife while yet all is well in Hroðgar's court are straightforward instances. More complex is the messenger's announcement of Beowulf's death;² at great length he recounts the rising to power of the Geats—now to fall a prey to peoples they had overcome; their downfall will be the direct consequence of Beowulf's death—who died in defending them; he *þe* as *beagas geaf* [he who gave us rings] has gained with his last breath yet more *beagas* [rings]³ treasure which is thus his personal perquisite, which in perishing with him on the pyre, shall symbolize the joys now to pass for ever from the Geats.⁴ This tendency to antithesis, frequently verging on paradox, and the constant play of irony are but stylistic manifestations of those movements of the poet's thought which shape the very stuff of the poem.

Stylistic detail might be expected to give reliable indications of the lines on which the theme is constructed; and it is fortunate that

² 2900-3075.

³ 3011-14.

þær is mæðma hord
gold untrine græmne geccat[po]d
ond nu æt stōcean sylles teore
beagas [ge]bohte.

[There is a hoard of treasures, countless gold grimly purchased and now at last rings bought with his own life.]

⁴ 3015-24.

the style of *Beowulf* has attracted a large share of the most discerning criticism. Analysis of style is in this case a justifiable approach to analysis of structure. The general impression that *Beowulf*, lacking clarity and speed, is remarkable rather for depth and vibrancy needs explanation in terms both of style and of structure. These effects are partly due to a method of evocation and cross-reference in which contrast is an important element. Notable examples of description by contrast are the allusions to Sigemund, Heremod, and Offa; and there are constant lesser instances of this method and its corollary, parallelism. As a structural principle, it may be traced in the antiphonal exordium. We hear first of the mighty destiny and wide fame of the Scyldings.⁵ The crescendo of Scylding power rouses opposing forces of cunning evil ever lurking to reverse the prosperity of mankind; by Grendel's raids the fame of the Scyldings is blasted, the utmost human effort frustrated, the mightiest of rulers made impotent. Beowulf is then introduced in all-powerful enterprise of untried youth. Here the concentration of the double flow increases: for Beowulf is connected with Hroðgar both by grateful allegiance, because of the favour shown to his father, and by his undertaking the trial of valour where others have failed. Complementing the knowledge that Hroðgar his *hold wine* [trusty friend] is in need is Beowulf's desire to crown his exploits by the supreme enterprise of *ðing wið þyxe* [affair against the monster]. The duty of allegiance emerges in Hroðgar's recapitulation of Beowulf's *æþel* [noble descent] (457-72), the demands of Beowulf's career in his own account of his setting forth⁶ (405-41). Both are presaged in the greeting of Wulfgar (398-39), who recognizes in the bearing of Beowulf the *wlenca* [daring] and *higeþrymra* [greatness of heart] which have brought him to Heorot, as contrasted with *uræcsið* [exile-journey] (which brought his father). The allusion is oblique—Wulfgar is challenging Beowulf as a stranger—and its application by so much the more pointed. This same alternation is at work

⁵ Contributory themes in the same manner are intimated: Scyld's rich burial is contrasted with his destitute arrival, and the last state of Heorot with the first.

⁶ Cf.

hæbbe ic mærað fela
ongunnen on geogape

[I have undertaken many famous deeds in youth] and the emphasis on *ana* [alone] (425, 431).

throughout the poem. The suspension of the theme—the "balance" of which Professor Tolkien speaks—demands a constant confrontation of similar and dissimilar.

A fundamental element in this balance is the poet's distribution of his material within the orbit of a central idea. The descriptive method of recurrence-with-elaboration distributes epithets and qualifying phrases in this way. The simplest form is piling of varied repetition, of the type: *eorlscepe efnide, ealдре geneoðe, mæroðo fremede* [I did heroic deeds, risked my life, performed glorious feats] (2132–33).⁷ More complicated is the type: *þonne heora bunden, hamere gebrycen, sweord swate fah swin ofer helme ecgum dyhtig andward scireð* [when the bound blade, forged by the hammer, the sword adorned with blood, with strong edges cuts against the swine over the helmet] (1285–87), or *forðon he ær fela nearo neðende niða gedigde, hildelemma, syððan he Hroðgares, sigoreadig serg, sele felsode; ond æt gude forgraþ Grendeles mægum laðan cymes* [since he before, braving many distresses, endured the battle, the crash of combat, after he, the victory-blessed warrior, cleansed Hrothgar's hall; and crushed in fighting Grendel's family, the hostile race] (2349–53).⁸ Here the amplification of several interdependent ideas is carried through by turns, so that the parts of the sentence are interlocked by a spaced and cumulative reinforcement—a method which reaches its ultimate development in the poetry of the Norse skalds. And in the last analysis, the "synonyms" so characteristic of Old English poetic diction express in little the multiplicity, the resolution into separate aspects, shown in the presentation of the theme itself.

For the structure of the poem is not sequential, but complementary; at the outset certain parts of a situation are displayed, and these are given coherence and significance by progressive addition of its other parts. Already Klaeber has noticed a circumscribing movement, and in the most penetrating passages of his criticism he constantly recurs to this idea.⁹ He recognizes "an organic relation be-

⁷ See also 50–52; 1228–50; 1408–10; 2421–23; 2602–4.

⁸ See also 101–98; 1368–72; 1417–20; 1448–54; 2367–69.

⁹ "Irregular, circuitous movements," p. lxxv; "circuitous route," p. lxxiii; "The thought of this passage, though proceeding by a circuitous route, is not obscure," note on 80–114; Klaeber's *Beowulf*, 3rd edition, 1950.

tween the rhetorical characteristics and certain narrower linguistic facts as well as the broader stylistic features and peculiarities of the narrative" (p. lxxv), citing in particular "retardation by means of variations and parenthetical utterances" and further elaborating the idea in his statement: "The preponderance of the nominal over the verbal element, one of the outstanding features of the ancient diction, runs parallel to the favourite practice of stating merely the result of an action and of dwelling on a state or situation." Yet having worked out this organic relation and as good as stated the pervading conception imposing form on the whole material out to its fringes of verbal detail, he can suggest no structural unity, but speaks instead of "looseness" and "matter more or less detached from the chief narrative" (pp. lxxi, lxxii).

Klaeber has noted the outstanding instances of a circumambient structure, although the heading under which he groups them—Lack of Steady Advance—again shows that he does not allow the principle its fundamental importance. Most clearly in the fight with Grendel, but also to some extent in the slaying of Grendel's mother and the account of the dragon's hoard, we see the unfolding of an event into its separate aspects. Apparently, the sum of them all—synchronism and the momentary visual impression—is the one aspect not considered poetically significant. The course of the fight in the hall is several times reviewed,¹⁰ each time in different terms and with varying emphasis. Grendel's movements and motives and his final sense of defeat are first described (745–57). The poet next reverts to Beowulf's grapple, considered as a fulfilment of his *æfenspræc* [night-speech]. In 764–65 the climax, the tearing off of Grendel's arm, is obscurely stated in a metaphor.¹¹ The fight is then represented from the point of view of the Danes (765–90) who hear the din raging within their hall; the climax is here marked by the shriek of defeat, which is elaborated at some length (782–88). Lastly, the sensations of the Geats when they see their lord at grips with the monster provide an opportunity for contrasting Grendel's magic

¹⁰ Cf. Klaeber, pp. lviii and note on 710 ff.

¹¹ In support of this interpretation, cf. other instances of the concrete defined in abstract terms: *fela laf* [layings of the file]; *watergeas*, "the terrible waters"; *fuglas syma*, [joy of the bird]; Riddle 27, line 7, and the probable double entendre in *feorhstias* [life-tracks], 846.

immunity from bite of iron with his impotence against the decrees of providence (801–15); these reflections are concluded with an explicit account of the severing of the claw, darkly alluded to before. The outcome for each of the three parties—Beowulf, Grendel, and the Danes—is then summed up, and the severed claw again mentioned, this time as the proof and symbol of Grendel's final defeat. A similar disregard for the synchronizing of the separate aspects of an action is seen in the defeat of Grendel's mother. Throughout the struggle the poet draws out the implications of each stage; he describes the virtues of the magic sword which Beowulf seizes in his desperation (1557 ff.), occupies seven lines with the brandishing and victorious thrust, and next proceeds to display in one of his rare similes the flash of light which marks the defeat of the sorceress (1570–72). The beheading of Grendel's corpse is also worthy of note. Much space is given to the retribution implied in this act, and the appearance of the huge headless body is touched upon: only in the final phrase is it stated *ond hine þa heafde becearf* [and then he chopped off his head].

We learn of the dragon and his hoard by the same method of distributing essential parts of a situation into distinct groups. The first mention of the dragon

*oð ðæt æn ongon
deorcum nihtum draca rician*

[until that on dark nights one, a dragon, began to hold sway] (2211)

is followed by the incursion of the thief, which leads on to a description of the hoard as the heritage of a vanished line. By means of the last survivor's speech as he consigned them to the earth, the treasures are shown as emblems of mortal joys stilled by death in the dim past. We hear no more of the history of the hoard until the fight is over, and the Geats have only to look upon the ruin and perform the exequies of their lord. Then another feature is brought into play: the hoard is the direct cause of the deaths of the dragon and Beowulf by reason of the heavy curse laid upon it. Thus the functions of the hoard, as provoker of strife and as bringer of the inevitable *worulde gedæl* [parting from the world], are elaborated in the appropriate contexts: not to mention its subsidiary contributions by way of contrast and symbolism.

To illustrate yet wider distribution of elements cohering in one theme, we may take the knitting together of Danish and Geatish history and the relation between Beowulf's account of the fights at Heorot and the earlier description. In the central portion of the poem, which is dominated by domestic and dynastic affairs and courtly observances, one of the three essential elements in the warrior's character is displayed. He must have violence and strength as of a beast, most fully exemplified in youth when he must win his spurs by marvellous deeds. Wisdom and submission to the decrees of providence again are essential. But equally he must take his place as an aristocrat fit to move among kings. When communal court life first comes into the scene (491–661) it is little more than a scaffolding for Beowulf's adventure with the sea-monsters and his *beot* [boast]. Its next appearance (1008–1237) is much more substantiated. The affairs of both Danish and Geatish courts are included: allusions to the *facenstafas* [treachery] between Hroðgar and Hroþulf (1018, 1163), the tale of Hnæf Scyldinga who fell in Fresswæle, and also the downfall of Hygelac (1202). Beowulf is very honourably taken into this milieu, and his sphere extending over both courts is delineated. The next episode *per guman druncon* [where the men drank] (1647) is entirely occupied with the glorification of Beowulf; the part he is to play as king of the Geats (1707–9, 1845–53) and the function of kingship is defined, by contrast with Heremod and by comparison of the tried wisdom of the elder ruler with the sagacity already apparent in the younger (1842–43).

Beowulf returns to the Geatish court (1928). In accordance with the filling and deepening of the courtly scene in this part, a disquisition on the ideal type of high-born lady, shown by contrast with Þryðo just as the ideal king is contrasted with Heremod, is attached to the person of Hygd. In Beowulf's subsequent relation of his adventure, the stress on the affairs of the Danish court is accentuated by a full account of the Heaðobard attack merely hinted at in connection with the building of the hall (82 ff.). All this helps to fill out the picture of court life. This strain is concluded in 2199, where we hear that Beowulf is accorded a position among the Geatish nobility differing only in degree from that of Hygelac himself. The account of the fights at Heorot depicts the value of these episodes as an approach to an assured position in the knightly hierarchy. The

struggles are much toned down. Savage and fantastic elements are attributes of the earlier, more primitive Beowulf: here is no mention of the *leoh t unfeiger* [light un-fair] streaming from Grendel's eyes, nor of the fearful din and the cry, nor of the fens beyond; of the severed claw it is said merely *him sto swiðre swaðe wearðade* [his stronger (hand) stayed behind]. Flatter, less vivid terms are used: *wearð . . . to muðbonan* [was . . . the devourer] instead of *synnedeðum sweaþh* [he swallowed the huge morsel]; *eatoð efengrom* [horrid evening-angry-one] is a concise but not very picturesque description of Grendel; the phrases *wæs . . . hild onsege* [the fight was fatal] (2076), *wæs . . . feorh uðgegne* [was parted from life] (2123), *unc hwile wæs handgemene* [we two were for a while hand-joined] (2137) could not well be more abstract. Room is found for prosaic and curious detail, such as the name of the warrior Grendel devours and the description of the *glof* [glove or pouch], neither given elsewhere. Emphasis is laid on the advancement of Beowulf's career: the princely rewards given (2101-3, 2134, 2142-47), his rôle as emissary of the Geats (2095-96), and his reliance on his *heafod-maga* [near-relative] Hygelac (2148-51). The theme is brought out still further by innuendos defining knightly conduct by contrast (2166-69, 2177-83), and is finally closed on the dominant of Beowulf by a description of his boorish beginnings (2183-88)—a fact we learn only when it is introduced to heighten Beowulf's eminence and substantiate the comment that a *treading mann* [glory-blessed man] will always make good.

The poetry of this time (like the visual art) reaches a high degree of abstraction and formalism. As far as his medium, a sequence of words, will allow, the poet has detached his theme from the processes of time and space and disregarded the appearances which for practical purposes constitute reality. He is able to evaluate his "action" directly, by exhibiting the parts in their aesthetic and moral relations. Hence the "moralizing" passages should be regarded as an integral part of the subject and are in no sense digressions—indeed, they are inextricably blended with some of the finest poetry in *Beowulf*. Emphasis on the causal relation is not required. The structure is not a progression, and follows no direct line. The writer of *Beowulf* is in fact a true poet; he has created a tragic unity, he sees with the poet's eye which splits and recombines the elements

of everyday perceptions. The signs and symbols that he uses are now unfamiliar, representations which need to be interpreted; we should not be misled into thinking them accidents. The ritual of language and exploitation of its metaphysical aspects which are the most outstanding features of this style have repeatedly won the attention of critics,¹² and provide the best clues to the underlying structural unity.

¹² Cf. Klaeber, pp. lxiii-lxvi.