The English Society of Japan

THE IMAGE OF BEOWULF AS KING AND HERO

SOME INTERPRETATIVE AND CRITICAL PROBLEMS*

Hiroto Ushigaki†

Is Beowulf indeed a good king? This is one of the pivotal questions closely related to the interpretation and evaluation of *Beowulf*. The critical history of the poem shows a wide variety of views, ranging from the classical, happy one that sees the poem designed as a Fürstenspiegel with Beowulf embodying the ideal of kingship, an ideal that is " a mixture of Germanic-heroic and Stoic-Christian ideas,"[1] to the more recent negative views in which he is seen as a flawed king: the most acrimonious of them accuses him of the sinful pride and avarice that Hrothgar has warned him against. Thus, so many critics, so many views. Whence come the diversity and the polarization of opinions? Are they merely attributable to the difference in the critical stance one takes, the criteria one applies, or the comparison one makes with other sources? Or are there any undercurrents in the very structure of the poem that defy a coherent analysis?

It is John Leyerle who, focusing on the society portrayed in the poem, asserts that the flaw of Beowulf arises from " the fatal contradiction at the core of heroic society."[2] Leyerle's criticism of Beowulf is based on the implication that his fight with the dragon is a reckless and unkingly behaviour motivated by an excessive personal heroic pride, which, leaving his people without mature leadership, will lead even-

* This paper forms a sequel to my previous one, " The Image of ' god Cyning ' in *Beowulf*: A Philological Study," *Studies in English Literature, English Number 1982*, pp. 63–78. I am very grateful to Mr. Jeffrey D. Herrick, my colleague, for his helpful comments on my English.

† Associate Professor at Kagoshima University.

[1] Levin L. Shücking, " The Ideal of Kingship in *Beowulf*," in *An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism*, ed. by Lewis E. Nicholson (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1963), p. 49.

[2] John Leyerle, " Beowulf the Hero and the King," *Medium Ævum*, XXXIV, 2 (1965), p. 89.

NII-Electronic Library Service

The English Society of Japan

tually to the tragic destruction of the whole society. Behind this view lies an axiomatic generalization that every hero makes a bad king—the more heroic, the worse: the king faces the two opposing demands of heroic action and prudent leadership and they necessarily contradict each other. If we push this theory to extremes, we come to the plain conclusion that a hero cannot and should not be a king or vice versa; a plausible one, but doesn't all this seem too rational-minded? Do the two really contradict? Though ostensibly convincing and irrefutable, Leyerle's argument is, I think, somehow irrelevant. Our objection to Leyerle's view is that, detached from the text and holding to the modern stance, he forms his own generalized theory and, in return, tries to apply this a priori criterion to the text itself. The critical process should be quite the reverse. Now let us turn to the poetic text and consider the problem of heroism and kingship in the light of the value system working within the poem. The Germanic king is one who must fulfill the overriding duty to act as a 'protector of the people' mainly by actual exercise of his martial prowess. He is, therefore, expected to be an able 'war-king' who, following the warrior ethic of honour, must be prepared to fight valiantly for the community. What drives him to such deeds of valour is a heroic aspiration for an undying name. In this way, heroic pursuit of personal glory and kingly concern for the common good can coexist: far from being contradictory, they are complementary to each other. A good king must, first and foremost, be a good hero: in the heroic world a king's ability and integrity are, paradoxically, tested only in hardship. In the case of Beowulf the greatest hardship is his fight with the dragon, which is not an imprudent fight started by himself, but a challenged one; a defence and counterattack against the furious ravager. Given that he is the protector of the country, his reaction is quite legitimate. It is for the hero, if challenged, to accept the defiance, and it is equally for the king, if attacked, to protect his people. There is no other choice open to Beowulf the heroic king, and there is every justification in his decision to face the dragon. His decision is in no way foolhardy: he shows discretion in making a special iron shield (l. 2339) and in taking eleven picked warriors to assist him (l. 2401; *cf.* l. 2638). He is fully conscious of the severe bearing of the situation; he takes the unusual precautions because he knows he must face the worst (ll. 2518b–24a). This is strikingly in contrast to the way in which the equally aged king Hrothgar once

NII-Electronic Library Service

The English Society of Japan

coped with a similar serious crisis. Keeping up his heroic pride even in his old age, Beowulf has chosen to fight with the deadly foe, in sharp contrast with Hrothgar, who, in the devil of a fix, was so helpless that he chose to survive, thereby letting two monsters ravage his hall every night. Yet there is an irony in that Beowulf's heroic reaction and death are to seal the destiny of his people. One important point we cannot miss is that, however individualistic Beowulf's heroism may appear to a modern critical mind, the poet does applaud it in his own voice. In commencing the struggle with the dragon, Beowulf declares his firm resolution to face the enemy alone, disdaining to be aided by his men (ll. 2532b–37): we see here a forceful expression of his inflexible determination on a single-handed fight, backed as it is by a strong sense of duty and peerless heroic pride. And just a few lines later (ll. 2540b-41), the poet does not hesitate to praise him overtly, in very carefully chosen words. The important words here are *ānes mannes* (l. 2541)[1] echoing *mīn ānes* (l. 2533) uttered by Beowulf; a marked linguistic device by which the poet can bring into focus the hero's noble single-handed undertaking. Even if Beowulf's eventual death is to lead to the ruin of his tribe, the poet celebrates the nobility of the heroic deed, achieved by a still strong, but rather aged king, whose death would therefore be only a question of time anyway. One sees here unusual heightening of emotion and the evocation of an immense sense of loss; ironies and tensions that Beowulf's heroism and his glorious death awaken in the mind of the reader.

From what has been said, it is clear that Beowulf's heroic daring is of the kind that can be praised when judged by an inner, heroic standard alone and could be criticised when judged merely by outer, non-heroic (and, I am afraid, often biased) norms, for instance, the rational mind, as in Leyerle's case. Leyerle's sociological approach, as it may be called, is almost clearly one-sided, and, even worse, quite alien to literary criticism: it runs the danger of disregarding the complexity of the total potential meaning of the poem, of disregarding those aesthetic elements to which any reader of heroic poetry will be urged to respond. And the upshot is that he callously leaves out so much of the beauty of the poem. What we have to do is to return to the text and start again from there.

[1] All the citations from *Beowulf* are from Fr. Klaeber's edition, *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, 3rd ed., with Supplements (Boston: D. C. Heath and Company, 1950).

NII-Electronic Library Service

The English Society of Japan

The motives which we find in the text for the old king's heroic action are: to take revenge on the dragon for his attack (l. 2336), to seek a feud (l. 2513), to win the gold that the dragon hoards (ll. 2509, 2536), and to do the noble deeds that are required of a heroic king (ll. 2514, 2535). All these are motives which square well with the principles of the Germanic heroic code. Margaret E. Goldsmith, however, senses in Beowulf's motives, especially in his motive to win gold, something selfish and impure, and indicts him of avarice, the vice that Hrothgar advised him to avoid. She blames him, saying that he is tainted with "arrogance and love of treasure."[1] Later, she made a further elaboration of her allegorical and exegetical interpretation.[2] Her theory has had a sensational impact on *Beowulf* criticism,[3] and not a few epigones have followed in her footsteps. So it is worthwhile to make an examination of whether her theory is valid or not. Her theory largely concerns what is called Hrothgar's sermon, which occupies the central position in the poem, and which bridges, as it were, the narrative gap between the first and the second part in such a way that our interpretation of it has a direct bearing upon our total appreciation of the poem.

Hrothgar's sermon is both poetic and homiletic in tone. The rhetoric he uses is clearly that of a preacher who expresses current Christian outlooks and sentiments, giving them forceful theological images and metaphors: God's providential order, the sins of pride and avarice, and the arrows of the devil. And this tone may even lead us to the momentary illusion that it is the poet himself who is preaching. The sermon falls, to some degree, in line with the proneness to moralizing and didacticism often seen in other passages of the poem. The homiletic passage strongly suggests that, while composing this part of the poem, our poet had his newly converted Christian audience in mind (in the poet's own days, entertainment and enlightenment seem to have been the two major functions of poetry). To the extent that the homiletic

[1] Margaret E. Goldsmith, "The Christian Theme of *Beowulf*," *Medium Ævum*, XXIX, 2 (1960), p. 95.

[2] Margaret E. Goldsmith, "The Christian Perspective in *Beowulf*," *Comparative Literature*, XIV (1962), pp. 71–90, and *The Mode and Meaning of 'Beowulf'* (London: Athlone Press, 1970).

[3] See, especially, "Allegorical, typological or neither? Three short papers on the allegorical approach to *Beowulf* and a discussion," in *Anglo-Saxon England* 2, ed. by Peter Clemoes and others (London: Cambridge University Press, 1973), pp. 285–302.

NII-Electronic Library Service

The English Society of Japan

vehemence sounds extraneous (at least to our modern ears) it seems to stand isolated from the rest of the poem and mar the poetic integrity and artistic balance. In spite of these apparent incongruities, however, it is clear that Hrothgar's immediate aim is to teach Beowulf *gumcyste* (l. 1723) befitting a Germanic king, and that his final concern is to give Beowulf a moral lesson, drawn from his own experience, on what mature kingship should be, to communicate general reflections on human affairs such as the vicissitudes of men's fortunes, the limitations of their glory and the inescapability of death. The ultimate message of the sermon is therefore at once practical and philosophical rather than exclusively Christian and, for that matter, remains at the level of personal advice for Beowulf.

What Hrothgar's sermon amounts to, in my interpretation, is:

> Know everything on earth—life and its prosperity (*eorþan wynne*, l. 1730, *weorðmynda dǣl*, l. 1752)—has its end (*ende*, l. 1734); know from this that life is transitory (*lǣne*, l. 1754, *āne hwīle*, l. 1762), that all men, even the strongest hero or king, are equally doomed to die (*fǣge*, l. 1755); know also that all this is part of God's providence; learn manly virtue from the bad king who, lacking this knowledge, has become stingy and cruel and is driven away from human happiness (*mondrēamum from*, l. 1715); be a good king who is liberal (*cf. bēagas geaf*, l. 1719b, *on gylp seleð / fǣtte bēagas*, ll. 1749b–50a, *unmurnlīce mādmas dǣleþ*, l. 1756), who eagerly seeks fame (*cf. æfter dōme*, l. 1720a), and who avoids pride and avarice (*oferhygda dǣl*, l. 1740, *ðone bealonīð*, l. 1758), follow your conscience (*se weard*, l. 1741, *sāwele hyrde*, l. 1742) but reject the crooked advice of the devil (*wōm wundorbebodum wergan gāstes*, l. 1747); know that life is full of sudden change (*edwenden*, l. 1774), that death, taking various shapes, will come soon to you (*ðec . . . dēað oferswyðeð*, l. 1768), and that, therefore, forethought (*cf. þā forðgesceaft*, l. 1750) and readiness are all; to realize this, he seems to say finally, is to choose ' eternal gain ' (*ēce rādas*, l. 1760).

The thought expressed here is in part a recapitulation of the view on what a young potential king ought to do, put forth at the beginning of the poem (ll. 20–25) where our poet affirms that a young warrior should do good deeds by ' liberal gifts ' (*fromum feohgiftum*) in preparation for old age. It is also a rephrasing of the philosophical meditation on human existence expressed, for example, in ll. 1057b–62 where our poet, after referring to God's providence, states confidently that ' understanding (*andgit*), forethought (*ferhðes forepanc*), is best in every way,

NII-Electronic Library Service

The English Society of Japan

since he who lives here for long in these days of strife (*on ðyssum windagum*) shall experience much of good and evil'—a curious mingling of a pessimistic view of life, some touch of optimism and a strong sense of stoicism, a reflection of our poet's peculiarly Anglo-Saxon empirical wisdom. This fine combination of ideas, at once pragmatic and metaphysical, is, I think, the essence of Hrothgar's sermon. Seen in this light, the final purpose of his speech is not to admonish, as Goldsmith would have it, against the sins of pride and avarice: we should note that these vices are only one part of Hrothgar's argument.

At the outset of his speech Hrothgar says that Beowulf, who has wisdom as well as strength, is sure to become a lasting 'consolation' to his people, a 'help' to the warriors (ll. 1705b–9a). Obviously, what the aged king sees in the young hero here is potential aptitude for being the future king, and in his farewell speech some one hundred lines later, after praising the young man's acme of perfection in 'strength,' in 'mind' and in 'speech' (ll. 1844–45a), he reaffirms his conviction, saying that he will be the best king (ll. 1850–53a). It is clear, therefore, that the pivotal purport in this curious mixture of homiletic and heroic themes is to teach the young victorious hero, at a very dramatic moment, what a Germanic king should be and how he should live up to that ideal throughout his life, to teach this against the broader perspective of human existence, against a philosophical perspective. It is in this sense only that the sermon has its central position, that it forms a useful link between the first part and the second part.

There may still be readers who will nevertheless be inclined to think that Beowulf is to blame in his first response to the news of the fire-dragon attacking his own country; he feels, our poet says, the greatest sorrow and his breast surges with unusual 'dark thoughts' (l. 2332). Whether one interprets the much disputed *ofer ealde riht* (l. 2330) as referring to Christian law or to natural law, one thing our poet clearly tells us is this: in incurring the unexpected calamity, the aged king *thought* (l. 2329) he might have bitterly angered God. It would be, however, too rash to single out this moral reflection and link it to Hrothgar's sermon. Edward B. Irving is right when he points out that " to say that Beowulf feels guilty is not the same as to say that he is guilty."[1] It is true that uneasiness does not usually go with a hero—

[1] Edward B. Irving, Jr., *A Reading of Beowulf* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1968), p. 220.

NII-Electronic Library Service

The English Society of Japan

in fact, Beowulf in his youth never showed such a feeling—yet, compared with Hrothgar, who, about the same age as Beowulf, was utterly helpless when his hall was haunted by two monsters, Beowulf is humanly resolute in this extraordinarily hard plight. Taken aback by such a sudden attack, wholly groundless on his part, any man would naturally wonder if it is not a retribution for some sin he might have committed unwittingly. Such an inner voice, uttered by the hard-bestead king, should not be taken as a twinge of weakness: rather, it is a testimony to his conscience and natural, almost religious, piety, and gives a human touch, I believe, to a flat figure that otherwise would remain impassively perfect and cut-and-dried all along. In no passage hereafter does Beowulf or our poet mention, or even allude to, the matter in question. In his dying speech, spoken to Wiglaf, after referring to his blessed rule for fifty years, to his absolute freedom from treacherous quarrels, and to his having made no false oath, Beowulf says that he can die with a conviction that he has ' solace ' (*gefēan*, l. 2740) in all this, and then declares his sterling innocence before God (ll. 2741–43a). Emphatically, his central concern in reviewing his life, on his deathbed, is not with a particularly Christian sin such as pride and avarice; it is with the ' murder of his kinsmen ' (l. 2742), a crime, to be noted, which he has never, he is proud to say, committed in his life, and which Hrothgar in his sermon mentions as one of the hateful crimes in any good kings. Our poet also refers to this crime more than once (ll. 1167b–68a, ll. 2166b–69a, etc.) as a serious violation against the Germanic ethical code.

To return to the problem of our hero's motive in winning the dragon's gold, a motive in which Goldsmith wants to detect something impure and sinful: in Germanic, heroic standards of value, treasure is the indispensable material for kingly generosity. Winning the treasure of the dragon is, it seems, a common Germanic motive and conveys no negative meaning: Sigemund, a legendary Germanic hero, gained posthumous fame by slaying a dragon, keeper of the hoard, and our poet says in a positive tone that ' he could enjoy the ring-hoard at his will ' (ll. 894–95a). A king, however, should not keep his treasure wholly to himself; he should generously give it to his people. That Beowulf is never selfish is clear from his dying words (ll. 2797–801a). We are told at the last moment, in our hero's own words, that his motive has been selfless: he has wanted the treasure for common profit (*mīnum lēodum*, l. 2797) and for the need of his people (*lēoda þearfe*, l. 2801).

NII-Electronic Library Service

The English Society of Japan

Beowulf's last speech is a moving one: the dying king confirms his guiltless life and shows his single-minded devotion and deep love for his people, his matchless generosity. It is the speech of a man who, with a strong moral sense, has lived a just and noble life, true to his personal and kingly honour. It is, therefore, for this reason, and no other, that his soul, our poet says, departed from his body to seek ' the judgement of the righteous ' (*sōðfæstra dōm*, l. 2820). Beowulf's moral perfection at death and his future salvation seem beyond question.

It is almost certain, it seems, that in the eyes of our poet, and, perhaps, in the eyes of God, Beowulf's behaviour is not selfish but totally altruistic. But, notwithstanding what has been said thus far in justification of his moral integrity, the problem at issue is not so simple. We cannot efface the impression that there lies something ambiguous, something that defies a unified explanation, in the develpment of the narrative, in particular, in the multiple functions of the treasure. In the Germanic and heroic contexts, treasure has obviously a positive meaning, say, as a token of generosity, as a reward for valour, as a symbol of tribal continuity, or, as Michael D. Cherniss points out, as a sign of one's social status and moral worth.[1] There are, however, in our poem, cases of negative significance, in which some conflict of meanings will inevitably be seen, concerning, particularly, the gold buried or hoarded underground. Gold hidden in the earth has magical powers over men (ll. 2764b–66), heathen gold is cursed in a Christian sense (ll. 3051–57, ll. 3069–75) and buried gold is futile (ll. 3166–68). Specifically in ll. 3069–75, there is a crux notorious among the critics, and it is a much disputed problem whether or not Beowulf has died incurring a curse. It seems that our poet's real intention here is to show that, given God's grace, Beowulf is wholly free from the sin of avarice. One thing is at least clear: it is the dragon that has kept the treasure secretly and, to borrow our poet's own word, *unrihte* (l. 3059), implying that to do so is against the will of God. Be the matter what it may, there is an apparent clash of values: one is the heroic acceptance of the treasure as worthful and another the ascetic denial of it as worthless. And we cannot remove the impression that this ambivalence toward the gold erodes in one way or another the image of Beowulf. There is, however, no sure means for us modern readers, who lack precise knowledge

[1] Michael D. Cherniss, *Ingeld and Christ* (The Hague: Mouton, 1972), pp. 79–101.

NII-Electronic Library Service

The English Society of Japan

of the background of the poem, to decide whether we should take these different values as inconsistencies caused by an incomplete assimilation of two distinct cultures, Germanic and Christian, which are intrinsically incompatible, or whether we should regard them favourably as aesthetic complexities[1] arising from the Christian interpretation of heathen materials on the part of the poet. Though puzzling and cryptic to the modern readers, the ambivalence does not seem to have been felt, one could say, as an inconsistency by the poet's contemporary audience. What Larry D. Benson called "the late Gothic ability," that is, "to maintain contradicting attitudes and to derive aesthetic pleasure from the tension of unresolved conflicts"[2] is largely characteristic, it seems, of the Anglo-Saxons. In this light, the complexity of meanings, diverse sense of values and different attitudes can be seen as coexisting potentially in the poem, some as a result of (insufficient?) cultural assimilation and some as a result of (perhaps, incomplete) poetic amalgamation, and this uneasy coexistence is just one of the great factors that bring about an ambiguity of image in our heroic king. There is still no way of knowing whether this is accidental or intentional. But, from our discussion above, this, at least, is clear: if we, consciously or not, respond only to a limited element of the contrariety, then our hero's moral character will always change its aspect and his total image will elude us for good. In passing, it must be pointed out as one of our poet's important moral perspectives that he sees the earthly treasure as ultimately useless and vain: note the expressions *lǣne licgan* (l. 3129) and *nū gēn lifað/eldum swā unnyt* (ll. 3167b–68a), each referring to the dragon's hoard and the gold that Beowulf has gained at the sacrifice of his heroic life.

If such negative aspects of treasure are overemphasized, being associated willfully, as would be done by an oversensitive reader, with

[1] As regards the diversity of meanings, Edward B. Irving is, I think, very close to the truth:

> The hoard of treasure, for example, is the center of many meanings. It would be as well to admit that we cannot recapture all these meanings now. For it seems likely that even the pre-Christian attitude toward the treasure must have contained its own inherent complexities; when a Christian point of view (and which Christian point of view?) is superimposed on it without entirely replacing it, we have rich possibilities for ambiguity, if not for genuine confusion (*op. cit.*, p. 207).

[2] Larry D. Benson, "The Alliterative *Morte Arthure* and Medieval Tragedy," *Tennessee Studies in Literature*, XI (1966), p. 75.

NII-Electronic Library Service

The English Society of Japan

Hrothgar's sermon and Beowulf's moral reflection, there is some room for such an allegorical interpretation as Goldsmith's, which would be valid at the very best only locally and in no way overall. Such a naked condemnation of Beowulf for the sin of avarice is directly opposed, first and foremost, to our poet's own open, heartfelt approval, to the general tone of praise audible throughout the poem, and most crucially to the last eulogy for the deceased hero where he is crowned with the unique superlative epithets reserved only for him: no reader, whatever interpretation he may force, can deny that they are the greatest praise that a language is capable of, nor can he be so perverse as to twist these manifest linguistic facts. Secondly, any one will find it fruitless to attempt to see a highly abstract but very simplified allegorical scheme in such a poem as *Beowulf* that is made up of independent parts, some of them connected loosely or even abruptly by analogies and contrasts and some others apparently isolated, each one having its own full concrete meaning. To extend a possible allegorical interpretation of one passage or another to the whole or, still worse, to intrude exegetical ideas into that interpretation means to break up this, so to speak, partially linked structure,[1] a legacy handed down, I think, by an oral tradition (though there remains some doubt as to whether such a concept as we generally call ' structure ' holds good in our case). Our poet's interest seems to lie in the parts, so far as their own literal congruity is maintained, rather than in the coherence of the whole. So, such a highly abstract but arbitrary interpretation necessarily runs the risk of casting away offhandedly those superfluous and unwelcome parts that do not fit one's reading well and also, as in the case of Leyerle, of paying little attention to the pregnancy of meaning, the complexity of feeling, and the tensions coming from the interrelations of the parts. At any rate, an overly abstract way of thinking does not appear to be one of our poet's

[1] I derive my idea from T. A. Shippey, *Old English Verse* (London: Hutchinson University Press, 1972), pp. 153–54. There, citing William James, he refers to the four poets of the earlier part of the *Junius Manuscript* as follows:

> . . . they were imbued with a passion well described by William James: ' the passion for distinguishing . . . the impulse to be *acquainted* with the parts rather than to comprehend the whole '. The poets prefer ' any amount of incoherence, abruptness and fragmentariness (so long as the literal details of the separate facts are saved) to an abstract way of conceiving things that, while it simplifies them, dissolves away at the same time their concrete fulness '.

This bias seems to typify the *Beowulf* poet.

NII-Electronic Library Service

The English Society of Japan

mental habits nor allegory his total design. Therefore, to assimilate a morally biased and doctrinaire abstraction to our poem, even if it has partial validity, is an irrelevant approach which hampers our normal critical sense.

We must now grapple with our final problem. All the preceding discussion leads us in the end to think that the polarized image of Beowulf as king and hero might find its ultimate source in our poet's willing, if restrained, attitude of looking into the true meaning of heroism and its final defeat. Our poet manipulates both attachment and detachment well, switching his focus freely, though often in such an abrupt manner that it may appear puzzling to the modern readers, and this seems the major and decisive factor which, in some abstruse way, balks us in our attempt to grasp the total significance of the poem. And we know how well the poetic structure is framed and how finely and effectively our poet makes use of narrative techniques to suit his purpose. Needless to say, the main story is about our hero's valiant fight with the dragon and his noble death and funeral, with some extra room for our poet's moralizing and generalizing comments and meaningful remarks on such matters as the ephemerality of human life and its achievements, the unpredictability of fate, the unknowableness of death, etc. But these are not the only things our poet wants to tell us. What strikes us indeed is the fact that he devotes far more space to the historical events and episodes around the main story, connecting them to it by means of analogies and contrasts, as though to expand his immediate contexts and set the bright heroic foreground against the darker background so that the reader may share his insight into the essential meanings of life. This is why his narrative moves forward and backward, and even turns aside, bewilderingly. The flow of time often stops to run abruptly into the realm of timelessness where, interacting with each other, past, present and future overlap, as Howell D. Chickering has finely put it, " in a dreamlike ' montage ' fashion."[1] In short, there is " a collapse of sequential time into cyclical time."[2] Along with this

[1] Howell D. Chickering, Jr., *Beowulf: A Dual-Language Edition* (New York: Anchor Press, 1977), p. 359.

[2] *Loc. cit.* As regards this handling of time, Edward B. Irving also speaks of his impression as follows:

> . . . different moments in time are being presented almost simultaneously with great stress being laid on their intimate relation to each other: present, past, and future impinge so pressingly on each other that our normal sense of time sequence is threatened (*op. cit.*, pp. 199–200).

NII-Electronic Library Service

The English Society of Japan

manipulation of time, our poet uses, as freely and masterfully as a skilfull film director, such cinematographic techniques as flashbacks and flashforwards, cutaways and cutbacks, long and close shots, zooming in and out. We may say that the poem is, after all, an Anglo-Saxon version of a motion picture to be visualized in the audience's mind!

Taken in this way, all the complex structural framework and the kaleidoscopic shifts of viewpoint centre around our poet's intense interest in the universal meanings of human existence. While he goes on admiring heroism openheartedly in his narrative development of a fictitious and unrealistic story, he leads his reader to find, in historical events and episodes, those evil elements lurking in heroism, the violence and brutality to which any heroic society, ancient or modern, is doomed to be exposed, and thus he urges his reader to perceive the graveness of life against the backdrop of the recurrence in history of heroism. In other words, our poet is weighing heroism in balance with actual life, which conspicuouly leads to what T. A. Shippey calls the " two possible and valid attitudes to the heroic life " at the end of the poem, one " admiring its strength and beauty" and the other "considering its disastrous long-term effects on nations and individuals."[1]

That the two attitudes Shippey refers to are not limited to the ending of the poem but, rather, are present throughout the second part of the poem is clear from our argument outlined above. We also see how deliberate our poet is in giving his negative slant: he does not do so openly, in his own voice, but, instead, through the mouths of his characters, and it is by means of this chorus technique, as it were, that he can lend veracity to what he really wants to tell us. I would like to examine this matter in some details, citing a few examples. The first case in point is to be found in the famous critical words (ll. 3077–78) by Wiglaf, Beowulf's last devoted follower. We can read here a reflection of our poet's sceptic voice: heroism, however glorious it may be in fiction, is, after all, the logic of individualism that might be called *ān*-principle (*cf. ānes willan*, l. 3077);[2] a sceptic voice telling us that, in the light of a non-heroic standard, namely, by the criteria of real life, heroism only brings about *wrāc* ' misery ' (l. 3078). At first sight, these opening lines of Wiglaf's speech seem to be a final verdict on the fatal

[1] T. A. Shippey, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

[2] Other typical examples are: *āna* (ll. 425, 888, 2498, 2643, 2876), *mīn ānes* (l. 2533), *ānes mannes* (l. 2541), etc.

NII-Electronic Library Service

The English Society of Japan

flaw potential in heroism, though this lacks consistency, since he is the last person to voice such a verdict, and since he is the only one who, in the teeth of danger, has abided by the heroic code to the last moment. But, after those words, he voices his dilemma, his complex sentiments by saying that he could not offer his 'beloved lord' (l. 3079) 'any counsel' (l. 3080) to give over fighting with the dragon; then, referring, significantly, to the great price paid for the hoard (ll. 3084b–85a) and also to the inexorable fate that his lord has met (ll. 3084, 3085), he moves gradually into the praise of the deceaced hero's merit and of his supreme excellence as the 'worthiest warrior' (*wīgend weorðfullost*, l. 3099); lastly and most significantly, he touches upon God's possible protection of his soul (l. 3109). Taken as a whole, his speech is the expression of mixed feelings fluctuating from outspoken criticism to enthusiastic approbation; it is an outpouring of pent-up emotions in the fulness of his grief, which is curiously contrasted in its overall tone with his words of rebuke to his ten cowardly comrades some one hundred lines earlier, where, accusing them of their 'flight' (l. 2889b), their 'inglorious deed' (l. 2890a), he has passed his final sentence on them, bringing it home to them that the last choice left to a warrior is either noble death or inglorious life (ll. 2890b–91).

Wiglaf's criticism carries the frantic intensity of one who in his very maiden battle (see ll. 2625b–27) was destined to watch his beloved lord die a violent death as his sole and last devoted follower; an intensity which, therefore, could only find a sense of balance by venting direct blame on the very heroic deed that has led to that death and the misery of 'many a warrior' (l. 3077). Thus, though impressionistic in the utmost, his criticism seems to hit home. At any rate, his conflicting feelings and intuitive insight can be said to show at once the strength and weakness of a young warrior.

A similar but a more ominous criticism is given by one who is called the Messenger of the Geatas. As distinct from Wiglaf's emotional, rather personal voice, however, the speech of this nameless spokesman is dispassionate throughout and delivered against the broader perspective of history. First of all, he briefly tells the outcome of the battle and the sad news of their lord's death. His utmost concern at the very outset is the appalling foreshadowing of the coming of a 'time of war' with the 'fall of their king' (ll. 2910b–13a). The Messenger's intention here is not to lay personal blame on Beowulf for what he has hero-

NII-Electronic Library Service

The English Society of Japan

ically done; rather, his speech, by driving home the sad fact that the death of such a powerful king must lead directly to a national disaster, aims at predicting the gloomy future awaiting the nation. Then, suddenly looking into the past, he gives, in flashback form, a long survey of Geatish history: their hostilities with the neighbouring tribes, including Hygelac's fall and the fierce battle fought at Ravenswood. He visualizes the battle scenes with such a realistic touch that the reader feels as if he were watching them on a movie screen. They are poignant memories of the life once lived by the heroic, ferocious tribes, painful memories almost verging into a hideous dream of the violent world where dark impulses and brutality menace human existence: they are the past nightmares having the potential to become an actuality again at any time in the present or in the future. In this sweeping panorama of the past wars and strifes, the Messenger seems to trace them to their origins and to get hold of their kernel: the deep-rootedness of the feuds between the savage tribes and the very fatality of human hatred attending those trapped in the endless cycle of violence. After probing into the essence of the past searchingly in this way, he abruptly comes back to the present to tell again, but this time more elaborately and with a shift of emphasis, that the death of their king—the king who has guarded their country against enemies, who has advanced the ' people's welfare ' and who has done ' deeds of valour '—will renew the ' feuds ' (ll. 2999–3007a). What he implies here is that the fall of such a good king as Beowulf will cause the breakdown of the social security for which he has so far strived, and that it will inevitably bring the outbreak of war. It could not be a mere accident that the Messenger refers, as Wiglaf does, to the dearly bought treasure (l. 3012, ll. 3013b–14a),[1] emphasizing the ultimate irony that, in spite of its terrible cost, it is useless to the people. This observation leads him to foretell again, in flash-forward form, the tragic fate hanging over them, saying that they shall tread ' land of exile ' (l. 3019). And, finally, in ll. 3021b–27 he presents his vision of the dark future in a curt but striking style, which seems to be a gruesome picture of human nature at its tether: the cold image of the spears as a cruel means of slaughter; the absence of the sound of a harp, that symbol of human energy and joy; the aweful image of the beasts of battle in human dialogue. Now, instead of the harp, we

[1] In ll. 2415b–16, our poet himself alludes to the same point.

NII-Electronic Library Service

The English Society of Japan

hear the beasts of battle sing their triumphant song in shrill but hollow voices.[1] The bestiality in a peculiarly human voice here is, it seems to me, the very symbol of human nature in its bestial extremity, a symbol which is also a poetical summary of the Messenger's long speech. And, to show this dreamlike and hellish vision, or perhaps, to make the reader participate in this vision, is the real motive of the Messenger, who is, after all, a narrative shadow figure of our poet.

Our poet deliberately adds a few words of verification both before and after the Messenger's speech, saying that he told it ' truly ' (l. 2899) in the hearing of all and ' he did not lie much in facts and words ' (ll. 3029b–3030a). The reason for this is that, bearing in mind the historical fact that the Geatas, absorbed by the Sweons, had ceased to exist as a tribe, our poet lets the Messenger speak of this as a prophecy. It is, in short, a future history told as a past event, and this is in part why the reader has the curious impression that the far past occurs in the future and the future has occurred already somewhere in the past. He is thus led, almost unawares, into a sense of timelessness where he is compelled to catch a glimpse of the dark abyss of human existence. The Messenger's prediction must have sounded all the more truthful to the Anglo-Saxon audience, since they must have been familiar with the historical facts and since, more importantly, their peace and social stability could have been jeopardized at any time by strife between rival families, by internal power struggles and by attack from outside. In this way, our poet assesses heroism against actuality and puts into the mouth of this nameless character the disastrous effects that the potential ferocity and final defeat of heroism may have on life. The verdict seems the more impartial and objective because it is given by an anonymous, impersonal figure: he is only mentioned as *sē ðe næs gerād* (l. 2898b) and *se secg hwata* (l. 3028a). And it may be added that the Messenger's attitude combines the characteristics of a clear-eyed critic of history, a cool-headed social analyst and a sensitive poet, and behind all these we find the sincere and mature character of our poet.

Our third and last example is the lament of an old Geatish woman,

[1] As for the beasts of battle, Adrien Bonjour says what is in a sense to the point: " here, indeed, the beasts of battle are briefly turned into a symbol of the ultimate triumph of death, the common destiny of dynasties, and the final fate of man ("*Beowulf* and the Beasts of Battle," *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, LXXII (1957), p. 569). But his interpretation is, I think, only partly true.

NII-Electronic Library Service

The English Society of Japan

a lament which appears near the end of the poem, and which is, as opposed to the two preceding examples, told in indirect speech and in a peculiarly elegiac tone. What she sings is a doleful dirge in memory of the dead king, and what is significant here is that, without mincing matters, she enumerates, or rather, sums up laconically, the inevitable future results of the Geatish king's tragic fall so as to evoke our emotional participation in their imminence: evil days, much carnage, terror of foe, humiliation and captivity (ll. 3153–55a). She seems to say that all these are only part of the bitter past experience of human history to be repeated endlessly as long as human beings exist. This may be only too true. The prophecy of this old woman, who is perhaps a soothsayer, seems to hold good still in our days, though in a characteristically modern way. More to the point, however, her critical prophecy seems to be coming from her feminine instinct and sensibility.

From what has been argued, we might safely conclude that there are in *Beowulf* two different points of view. One is seen in the aesthetic way in which our poet openly extols Beowulf's heroic and kingly virtues such as his indomitable will, his unrivalled prowess, generosity and wisdom as well as his outstanding sense of honour, and in the way he reprobates those who faithlessly violate the heroic code as in the cases of Heremod and Beowulf's ten cowardly thanes who lose their valour: for the latter, it must be pointed out, our poet does not hesitate to pile up unique value words of very strong condemnation;[1] *ðā hildlatan* (l. 2846), *tȳdre trēowlogan* (l. 2847) and *unlēofe* (l. 2863). Beowulfian heroism could be defined as an expression of manly aspiration for human perfection, with an ironical recognition of man's mortality and the immortality of fame; a pathetic conviction that undying name alone can give mortal man glory, that such a name alone makes his life worth living. And in that very noble aspiration lurks, our poet is painfully aware, a dark brutal impetus driving man to the tragic, if glorious, destruction of his own self and those around him. It is this awareness that gives our poet the other point of view, the moral one, that violence will only breed violence. However, he has elaborately chosen a way

[1] Our poet seems to see the downfall of the heroic age in the cowardice of the ten thanes who, escaping from the battlefield, outlive their lord. Their behaviour was criminal in heroic society and was perhaps still in Anglo-Saxon society, but the poet's stance seems to be shown more in his critical tone, where we feel some hint of resignation: the true heroic age has gone and their shameful act cannot be helped, since they are, after all, modern boys.

NII-Electronic Library Service

The English Society of Japan

of expressing this moral view indirectly, by letting his characters voice it, thus giving it more dramatic force than otherwise, as criticism on his behalf, each character expressing it in his own way. The poet seems to urge us to open our eyes to the fatedness of human atrocity and know better thereby. If we do not, he seems to tell us with deep resignation and pity, the vicious circle of violence will go on forever. Regrettably, history seems to be teaching us this lesson still.

Seen in this way, our poet seems to tell us finally: heroism is itself a fine thing in so far as it evokes our admiration and sympathy, whether it ends in success or failure or even death, but it is also essentially and fatally bad, rooted as it is in a ferocious and destructive impulse and, therefore, threatening to human life. Moreover, there is an undercurrent in the work, not expressed as such, but very strong and deep, which might almost be called philosophical and religious. In our poet's fundamentally pessimistic view, which stands in marked contrast with Chaucer's essentially optimistic one, the world is full of strifes and evils, life is uncertain, human efforts are often vain, with good intentions ending in bad results, and human knowledge is extremely limited and, to crown it all, death is nothing but a mystery: in a word, life in this world is a tiny spot of light flickering in the vast, unknown darkness. This pessimistic view seems to find its ultimate expression in the negative value of the gold, which is the most powerful symbol for the transient splendour of earthly life. Our poet seems to have had a deep pity for those pagan souls who, however much they may have enjoyed life's prosperity, as symbolized by the positive value of gold, and whatever long-lasting fame they may have acquired in this world, must depart from this transitory (*lǣne*) life with no sure hope of afterlife,[1] salvation and true eternal glory in heaven. Against this background lies, I think, the critical view of our poet as a Christian, the view that, in the light of a higher ideal, the heroic ideal falls short. In other words, whereas what lingers at the core of the heroic ideal is intrinsically a pagan ethos, it is from the Christian standpoint that our poet sees it. Thus what our poet's sense of balance has told him to do is neither to cry up heroism blindly nor to cry it down mercilessly. Although our poet clearly has both nostalgic and sceptic attitudes toward the

[1] It is true that glimmers of hope for afterlife are expressed but the references are only sporadic and the concept is not clearly stated. There is virtually no allusion to happiness after death: this is perhaps intentional.

NII-Electronic Library Service

The English Society of Japan

Germanic heroic past, a downright criticism is not his intention. Avoiding extremes, he has taken great care to balance one against the other *poetically*.

Our close reading of the text and the critical approach based on it tell us in the end how the admiration of heroism in *Beowulf* is carefully relativized by our poet's sound historical sense, which is a kind of accumulated epic wisdom, by his cool perception of realities, his almost philosophical perception of the poignant conditions of human existence, and by his steadfast religious belief. And our conclusion is that the ambiguous image of *Beowulf* as hero and king has its ultimate root in our poet's complex attitudes toward the heroic world as well as in his handling of poetic materials, and in ironies and tensions of meanings collateral with them. If one measure of the maturity of a work of art can really be, as some critics would assert, " its inclusiveness, its awareness of complexity, its ironies and tensions,"[1] the ambiguity of image in *Beowulf* is, paradoxically, a true sign of the poem's multivalence and artistic maturity.

Received June 25, 1984

[1] René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature*, 3rd ed. (London: Peregrine Books, 1963; rpt. 1968), p. 246.

NII-Electronic Library Service