

THE DRAMA OF THE GEATS

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Donald Arni Flatt

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ABSTRACT

The pattern of the drama of the Geats in Beowulf differs from the patterns of events which serve to complement the stories of other national heroes in that, although the Beowulf poet glorifies the ideals of the hero and his people, the poem ends with a prophecy of national doom. This thesis considers the meaning of this pattern in Beowulf and examines the way references to the Geats serve to illuminate and to complement the main subject of the poem, the first and last achievements of a great king. Each of the passages referring to the Geats is found to be an integral part of the poet's design: together they form a perspective which allows the poet to dramatize those long accumulations of experience which, on one hand, test and prove in Beowulf the qualities of a good king. On the other hand, the passage of time leads to a separation in spirit between Beowulf and his men so that when the Geats are brought to the test in the dragon fight and fail to support their king in his hour of need, the audience realize that the Geatish nation cannot long survive the hero's death. The poet intends to show by the pattern of this drama that the responsibility of making the right choice is a burden placed not only on the king, but on each of the thanes. The poet achieves a remarkable unity between his main subject and the background of Geatish history, and in this unity he expresses the idea that a nation may waste the noblest acts of kingship and bring about its own destruction through the weaknesses of ordinary men.

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INTRODUCTION

Readers of the Iliad, the Æneid, or the Chanson de Roland know that the makers of these poems did not set out to tell the history, or even part of the history of their nation; instead the poet's approach was to take from the legends of the past the trials of a particular hero, Achilles, Æneas, or Roland, and to depict these against a dramatic background of events.¹ When Beowulf is compared to other heroic poems certain similarities and differences appear which may offer some insight into what the Beowulf-poet intended. In Beowulf, as in the other poems, we are dealing with an imagination stirred by the remembrance of things past; yet so ordering this inheritance of traditional material that the poet makes from it a new song with the semblance of historical truth: in Beowulf, the figures live and die within historical time and inhabit the "named lands of the North".² The main action of the first part of Beowulf takes six days, that of the second part one day. Yet throughout the poem, details from several hundred years of history are presented by the narrator and the characters, are brought to bear upon the action and provide the perspective by which we judge the theme. Hōmēr and the poet of the Chanson de Roland are concerned in much the same way with the shadows of lost glory. The simple story of the defeat of Charlemagne's rearguard in the Pyrenees by a tribe

of thieving Basques was shaped two hundred years later by the art of poetry into a masterpiece of heroic drama. And the Homeric poems, written about 800 B.C. during the so-called Dark Ages of Greece--long after the migrations of the Dorians and Ionians, at a time when the Lion's Gate at Mycenæ was thought to have been the work of giants--evoke the same sense of vanished greatness, of the brevity of heroic life.

Yet as the story of a people, the pattern of Beowulf is quite unlike that of the other poems. The Iliad depicts the action of some fifty days in the war between the Æcheans and their Dardanian foes. But between the withdrawal of Achilles from the struggle and his vengeful return Homer has called up not only the ten year history of the war but the entire ethos of the peoples. And even though, at the end, Patroklos has fallen and Achilles is doomed, the ultimate victory of the Æcheans is assured. For in this struggle with the civilization of Troy, their ideas and values have been tested and proved and the Greeks leave the shores of Ilium ready to establish the greatness of their way of life. The pattern of the Æneid as well leads from the ashes of Troy through the deaths of Turnus and Æneas to the founding of Imperial Rome. The Song of Roland like the Iliad is the drama of two civilizations in conflict. And even though Roland, the Ten Peers and twenty thousand Franks perish in the disaster at Roncevaux, in the action which follows, the code of knighthood

is upheld against the treachery of Ganelon, the "Paynims" are driven back from France and Christ Himself is vindicated over the idolatry of Islam. Each of these stories concludes with the founding of a civilization: the story of the Geats in Beowulf however, although glorifying their ideals, foreshadows the destruction of their kingdom and their way of life. And this rather unusual pattern of Beowulf among the stories of other peoples raises the question of the poet's intent.

The fates of the two nations in Beowulf, the Geats and the Danes, are bound up in the destiny of their ruling families, the Hrethlings and the Scyldings. The hero of the poem is not by birth a "crown" prince of either family, yet he is connected through his father's vows of marriage and service to both royal houses. Because of these connections the hero provides that unity of point of view which allows the poet to dramatize both aspects of the comitatus bond in the exploits of Beowulf, first as the young Geat retainer who in Denmark saves the Scyldings for the time being by destroying a pair of trolls, and again as the old and resolute people's-king whose last successful defense of the Geatish kingdom against a dragon ends in his own death and the downfall of the Hrethling dynasty. But the Beowulf-poet does not write a saga of the Hrethlings or an English Skjöldungasaga, although we may suppose the matter lay ready at hand. In fact the opening lines of the poem can be seen as an assertion by the poet

of his authority to sing all the well-known heroic Matter of Denmark. And the poem begins in this way with the succession of Danish kings from the half-legendary Scyld who changed the fortunes of his people--fortunes that increased with each generation until Hrothgar gave expression to the wealth and power of his nation with the building of Heorot.

Sele hlīfade
hēah ond horn-gēap, (81-2) ³

But the image of the completed meadhall is immediately followed by the lines foreshadowing its destruction by fire:

. . . heaðo-wylma bād,
lāðan līges; ne wæs hit lenge þā gēn,
þæt sē ecg-hete āpum-swerian
æfter wæl-nīðe wæcnan scolde. (82-5)

Within this scope, from the building of Heorot to its destruction by fire, we are told of Hrothgar's twelve year struggle against Grendel who, "maddened by the sound of harps,"⁴ comes to Heorot in the night to slaughter the helpless Danes.

Hrothgar's affliction is ended when Beowulf, a youngthane of the Geatish king, sails to Denmark with a troop of comrades and destroys Grendel and his vengeful mother. As the struggle against Grendel develops, the poet's assertion of his authority in the Matter of Denmark becomes more significant and more ironical. For even though the Danes were if anything more powerful in the eighth century at the time of the poem's composition than they were in the sixth, in Beowulf they suffer in comparison to the Geats who at that time came to their rescue. In the first

part of the poem the treachery and intrigue of the Danish court and the lack of faith of the Danish thanes are set against the courage and loyalty of the Geats. The fellowship of Heorot is threatened by the ambitions of the king's nephew, Hrothulf, as well as by a continuing feud with the Heathobards, and we are left to anticipate the downfall of the Scyldings. The central action of the first part of the poem is brought to completion when Beowulf returns home and tells his lord Hygelac, as part of his report, of the circumstances in Denmark between Hrothgar and Ingeld that will lead to the burning of Heorot.

The external structure of the first part of the poem, the historical setting--so rich in itself in dramatic potential--prepares for the action of the second part and for the downfall of the Geats.⁵ The second part of the poem (2200-3182) begins like the first with a brief chronology of Geatish kings which sets the central action--the dragon fight--in historical time. But the array of Geatish kings does not lead to the triumphant building of another Heorot. Defeat, not victory, is now the poet's theme.

Eft þæt geīode ufaran dōgrum
 hilde-hlæmmum, syððān Hygelāc læg
 ond Heardrēde hilde-mēceas
tō bonan wurdon,

 syððān Bēowulfe brāde rīce
 on hand gehwearf; hē gehēold tela
 fīftig wintra; wæs ðā frōd cyning,
 eald ēpel-weard. (2200-10)

The sequence of events is told in past tense even though they occur in the poem just after the scene of the young hero's homecoming. And no sooner are we given the image of Beowulf as a wise old guardian of the kingdom, than this is followed by the fateful words announcing the "succession" of the dragon:

Oððæt ān ongan
deorcum nihtum draca ricsian (2210-11)

The order of events now offers no time of respite the way the phrase--ne wæs hit lenge þā gēn "nor was it long after that"--did in foretelling the burning of Heorot. The second part of the poem begins, in contrast, with a pronouncement of imminent doom. As Beowulf prepares for his final venture against the dragon, the poet reveals, in a series of speeches and historical digressions, an increasingly ominous background of wars and the fall of kings. Step by step as the main action unfolds, the audience are made to realize that the Geats cannot long survive the death of their last great king. At the same time the Geats themselves are shown to have lost the qualities of courage and loyalty on which their survival depends. The poem ends with the prediction of renewed strife with the Franks and the Swedes, a new series of conflicts in which the Geats will be destroyed.

Beowulf then, like the Iliad, "is a work of art evolved within the scope of a chronicle; it is not the chronicle itself."⁶ The Beowulf-poet, however, uses the traditions of

the past in a way very different from their use by other heroic poets. The Aeneid, for example, was written to show a continuum of heritage and tradition stretching between the heroes of ancient Troy and their "descendants", the patrician families of Imperial Rome. Beowulf, was written at a time when the English were very conscious of the separation that had taken place between themselves and the descendants of their Germanic ancestors still living on the Continent. The lives of saints and martyrs expressed an ideal very unlike the ideal of the heathen comitatus, but these new heroes of the English, the milites Christi, shared with the heathens a part of the same ancient tradition in their contempt for death and their devotion to a higher destiny. Perhaps in recognition of this common heritage there was an awakening of interest among English and Irish monks, as Bede reports, in the people of the Continent as the objects of a new campaign.

"At this time (ie. 692 A.D.) Bishop Egbert, . . . living a life of exile in Ireland. . . planned to bring blessing to many people by . . . preaching the word of God to some of the nations who had not heard it. He had learned that there were many such nations in Germany, of whose stock came the Angles or Saxons now settled in Britain, . . . These nations include the Frisians, Rugens, Danes, Huns, Old Saxons, and Boructuars; and there are several other races in that region who still observe pagan rites. So this warrior of Christ planned to sail around Britain, and attempt to snatch some of them from Satan and bring them to Christ."⁷

The voyages of Anglo-Irish missionaries across the North Sea

to the pagan Continent were in many ways like a voyage back in time to the heroic age of the fifth and sixth centuries, the age that the Beowulf-poet so imaginatively recreates. In the world of Beowulf, the myths and traditions of the past are shaped by a man inspired not only by the nobility and splendour of ancient times, but touched as well by the tragic thought of those tribes that were lost. The poet, and those who went with him on this imaginative voyage, knew that those days were "heathen. . . and hopeless"⁸--hopeless, because the mass of people--whole nations, as Bede points out, were without the means of redemption. Yet in the drama that he creates, the poet shows that a man like Beowulf, by his good works and sound heart, could rise above the darkness of his time and become a radiant symbol of the ideal king. And by presenting his hero's life against a background of history the poet holds up a mirror for his age, and offers in the drama of the Geats an inspiration, a warning, and a moral for later generations.

The part played by the hero's people, the lost tribe of Geats, in the design of this drama deserves, I believe, more attention than it has received from critics in the past. This is the purpose of the present study. In this paper, I will begin by considering some examples of the poet's use of language and imagery in a detailed study of references to the Geats in an attempt to arrive at an assessment of their meaning in the poem. Secondly, I will examine the use the poet

makes of some of the details he has chosen in shaping the rather unusual structure of Beowulf. Finally, I will conclude with a few general observations about the poet's vision of man and his world; conclusions that are derived from this study of the drama of the Geats.

There are some sixteen passages in the poem referring to the Geats that I shall consider in some detail. Ten of these passages are found in the first part of the poem (1-2199), and they are the subject of part one of this paper. Although there is bound to be some overlapping and cross-reference in the discussion of the material, for the sake of clarity, the passages to be studied in part one are set out in the following order:

the voyage of the Geats and their arrival in Denmark (194-228),

the coastwatchman's challenge (229-331),

Wulfgar's challenge (331-398),

Hrothgar's account of Ecgtheow's feud with the Wulfings (456-472),

Unferth's challenge and Beowulf's reply (581-606),

the Geats' part in the fight against Grendel (688-709, 766-805),

Hygelac's death on the Rhine (1202-1214),

Danes and Geats in the fight against Grendel's mother (1600-1643),

the Geats' departure (1816-1865), and

the Geats' return to Hygelac's court (1888-1998, 2144-99).

In part two of this paper I shall consider the remaining six passages found in the second part of the poem. These include:

the poet's synopsis of Geatish history (2200-2212),
 the Survivor's lament and the origins of the
 dragon hoard (2221-2311),
 the poet's historical retrospect (2354-2396),
 Beowulf's recollections of Geatish history (2425-2509),
 the account of Wiglaf's descent, and his speeches
 to the cowards (2602-2666, 2846-2891), and lastly,
 the messenger's account of history and his prophecy
 of the Geats' destruction (2910-3026).

Klæber remarks, in his analysis of the poem's structure, that "the facts of Geatish history. . . are a little too much in evidence and retard the narrative of the second part rather seriously."⁹ One result of the present study may be to determine whether any of these passages are "encumbering digressions,"¹⁰ as Klæber suggests, or whether, as I believe, each of them is an integral part of the poet's carefully wrought design. In these references to the Geats the poet traces out their rise to power and renown in the North, and then he colours in the events of their ineluctable doom. The result is a drama which, as I hope to show, serves to illuminate and to complement the main subject of the poem, the first and last achievements of a great king.

THE DRAMA OF THE GEATS: PART I

The intended role of the Geats in the poet's design is evident in the way he presents his material. The poet begins by setting out in antithetical imagery the opposing forces in the drama. He recounts the rising to power of the kings of Denmark and proceeds to reveal in bold chiaroscuro the downcast state of Hrothgar's court as his fame and glory are obscured by the ravages of Grendel. The monster appears at first as an abstract perversion of human æðelu and gūðcræft, an antagonist whose unrelenting malice towards men has driven Hrothgar's nation toward the edge of chaos.

. . . wæs þæt gewin tō swyð,
lāp ond longsum, þē on ðā lēode becōm
nȳd-wracu nīpgrim, nihtbealwa mæst. (191-3)

. . . that struggle was too harsh, too
hateful and long-lasting, that had come
upon the people, a grim, violent persecu-
tion, the greatest of night horrors.

When the Danes are approaching despair in the struggle against this shadowy visitant, se þē in bystrum bād, this deorc deapscua who comes stalking silently from the misty moors, the Geats are drawn in flashes of light and the clamour of martial sound.

It is in distinct contrast to the mournful tones describing the twelve years of Hrothgar's affliction, that the poet turns with the somewhat grim understatement, þā him wæs manna þearf (201), since he was in need of men, to picture the voyage of the Geats. Unlike such travellers as the Wanderer in the lyrics of the Exeter Book, these warriors, we are told,

eagerly embarked. The ornaments are bright which they carry on board. And the ship is not the "sorrowful abode" of which the Seafarer sings but, "a foamy-necked floater, sped by the wind, most like a bird." Moreover it seems that in a sense the long dark night over Denmark begins to withdraw as the Geats approach because, we are told,

. . . land gesāwon, brim-clifu blīcan, (221-2)

[they beheld the land, the shining sea-cliffs]

And so bright are the shields they carry on shore and so war-like the clanking of their armour that the coastwatch hastens to confront them. The alliteration of the lines assists the visual imagery of the arrival scene by linking the Geats with an aura of light:

beran ofer bolcan beorhte randas, (231)

just as, in contrast, in the line

dēogol dæd-hata, deorcum nihtum (275)

the initial consonants and the metrical emphasis link this variation for Grendel with the powers of darkness. As the warriors climb to the high place where the best of houses stands, we are told that,

Eofor-līc scionon
ofer hlēor-bergan gehroden golde,
fāh ond fȳr-heard; (303-5)

[Boar-images shone over cheek guards gold
adorned, gleaming and fire-hardened.]

The boar-images shining over the cheek guards are symbols of courage. The sound of the troops marching up the street, .

resplendent in their armour, can be heard in the measured
beat of the lines,

Guð-byrne scān,
heard, hond-locen, hring-īren scīr
song in searwum. þa hīe tō sele furðum
in hyra gryre-geatwum gangan cwōmon. (321-4)

The disciplined rhythm of their march conveys a sense of
strength and harmony in the Geatish troop. As they approach
the hall, the lines, ending in long pauses, hold the impres-
sion of resolute purpose which continues until, with one
sense-echoing line, the poet announces their arrival:

bugon þā tō bence, byrnan hringdon, (327)
[Then they sat down on the bench--
mail shirts resounded.]

But if the Geatish warriors are seen as the bringers
of light, Heorot itself is compared with the sun;

līxte sē lēoma ofer landa fela. (311)
[its light shone over many lands]

The sun has already been associated with a victorious struggle
over darkness in the scop's song of Creation,

. . . se Ælmihtiga . . .
gesette sige-hrēpig sunnan ond mōnan,
lēoman tō lēohte land-būendum, (92,94-5)

[The Almighty established in triumph the
lights of the sun and the moon to lighten
landdwellers]

The common use in Old English poetry of the sun image as a
symbol of victory can be seen in Riddle #6,¹

Mec gesette sōð sigora Waldend
Crīst tō compe. (1-2)

[Christ, the true Ruler of victories, placed
me (ie. the sun) in the battle.]

The image appears again as the hope and guide of seamen in
the Runic Poem.

(sigel) sēmannum symbles biþ on hihte
ðonn hi hine feriaþ ofer fisses beþ
op hi brimhengest bringeþ tō lande² (45-7)

[The sun is always a joy to seamen when
they go forth over the fishes' bath until
they bring the ship to land]

The Beowulf-poet's striking comparison of Heorot to the sun
shining over many lands suggests that Hrothgar's court was
the symbol of a destiny sought by many nations in their quest
for a more noble way of life. The prestige and influence of
this court once inspired the whole world. By the imagery of
the Geats' arrival, particularly by the light from their
battle-gear and the concord and vitality of their march, the
Geats are identified as members of this great moral and heroic
community. They are drawn towards Heorot at this time because
the very centre of their civilization is in danger. As Beowulf
tells Hrothgar, now, because of Grendel,

secgað sē-liðend, þæt þæs sele stande, . . .
īdel ond unnyt, siððan æfer-lēoht
under heofenes hador beholen weorþeð. (411, 413-14)

[sailors say that this hall stands empty and
useless after the evening light becomes
hidden beneath the cover of the sky]

Working in a rich poetic tradition, the Beowulf-poet is able
to draw on primordial images like the darkened sun and the
desolate moors to evoke the mystery of a distant past and the

depths of the human mind. The image of the sun, beorht bēacen Godes, will appear again as a symbol of victory in Beowulf's boasting speech to Unferth. But in this later speech Beowulf makes it clear that Heorot is darkened not only by the hellish powers dwelling in the hall at night, but by such human hearts as that of the kin slaying spokesman. Grendel has been referred to as a "hall-thane" (142) and Unferth sits at Hrothgar's feet. The Geats, bringing light, are caught up in an elemental struggle against the spirit and the race of Cain.

Turning back for a minute, we see that the way in which the poet handles the introduction of these people is in sharp contrast to his introduction of the Danes. The invocation of the opening lines with their assumption of an heroic tradition well known to the poet's audience,

Hwæt wē Gār-Dena in gēar-dagum
 þēod-cyninga þrym gefrūnon,
 hū ðā æþelingas ellen fremedon! (1-3)

has no parallel in the more matter-of-fact tones used to introduce the Geats. Instead the poet works from general statements about the people to specific details which show their character. Thethane of Hygelac who heard at home of the deeds of Grendel is a "valiant man", "noble and powerful", the greatest in might among men at that time. And although he is a retainer in Hygelac's court, he is obviously a man of some authority and initiative;

Hēt him ȳð-lidan
 gōdne gegyrwan; cwaed, hē gūð-cyning
 ofer swan-rāde sēcean wolde, (198-200)

[He commanded that a good ship be made ready
 for him, he said that he would seek the
 war-king over the swan road.]

His staunch minded response to Hrothgar's need is urged on by
 certain snotere ceorlas - wise men whose wisdom and generosity
 are tempered with affectionate loyalty;

þēah hē him lēof wāre;
 hwetton hige-rōfne, hāl scēawedon. (203-4)

[though he was dear to them, they urged on
 the adventurer, they examined the omens.]

The warriors chosen from among the Geats are the cēnoste that
 could be found, and the leader is lagu-cræftig, sea-skilled,
 who leads them to the shore. And in contrast to the despair-
 ing Danes who have turned to the slayer of souls for comfort,
 the Geats give thanks to God for their easy voyage. There is
 an impression of social order in the action of these people,
 a sense of gathering unity behind their common venture. Per-
 haps now like the Danish coastwatch whom fyrwyrt bræc--the
 reader as well is "tormented with curiosity" as to "what men
 these were".

The abstract qualities of the people, their wisdom,
 generosity and courage are made concrete in the images of the
 marching troop and the brisk voyage, and then are given dra-
 matic force in the speeches of Beowulf, of the Danish coast-
 watch, of Wulfgar and Hrothgar. The formal reserve of the

coastwatchman's challenge breaks down in wary admiration of the Geatish troop. "Never more boldly" as he says, have shieldbearers come there. The ænlīc ansȳn, the unique appearance, of one in particular is not that of a retainer decked out with weapons. Brandishing his spear, the coastwatch demands to know the Geats' lineage and where they have come from. Beowulf's name has not yet been given. He answers the coastwatch as one of "the men of the Geatish people," Higelāces heorð-genēatas, and in him they speak as a people proud of their lineage, made famous by their heroes. Beowulf can say of his father that he was æþele ord-fruma, a leading prince, and that,

hine gearwe geman
witena wēl-hwylc wīde geond eorþan. (265-6)

[every wise man wide over the earth
readily remembers him.]

And now we are told the Geats have come "þurh holdne hige , "in gracious mind", to seek Hrothgar and to offer their assistance "þurh rūmne sefan ræd", with the counsel of a generous heart". This first encounter has a dramatic impact on the watchman. He had at first taken the Geats to be a raiding party; now he acts as their guide on the way to Heorot, and refers to them as scearp scyld-wiga, diligent shield warriors, as hold weorod, a loyal troop, and as gōd-fremmendra, the ones doing good.

In the Geats' second challenge at the door of Heorot, their appearance has a similar effect on Hrothgar's herald,

Ne seah ic elþēodige
þus manige men mōdiglīcran (336-7)

[I have not seen strangers--so many
men--more bold.]

The herald implies by what he says to the Geats that most strangers come as exiles, but in his speech to Hrothgar he says of the Geats that,

hȳ on wīg-getāwum wyrðe þinceað
eorla geæhtlan; (368-9)

[they in their war-gear seem worthy of
earls' esteem]

To Hrothgar who knows their race and lineage they are neither spies nor exiles but a "blessing" sent by "holy God" to the West-Danes. It is with some joy that he orders Wulfgār to be in haste, to tell them with words that they are welcome to the Danish people. Into the hall march the þrȳðlic þegna hēap, the company of strong thanes, and standing before the Danish king Beowulf explains the coming of the Geats:

þā mē þæt gelærdon lēode mīne,
þā sēlestan, snotere ceorlas,
þēoden Hrōðgar, þæt ic þē sōhte,
forþan hīe mægenes cræft mīne cūpon, (415-18)

[So my people, the best wise earls, counselled
me, lord Hrothgar, that I should seek you
because they know the strength of my might]

These Geatish leaders who have urged Beowulf to help Hrothgar appear as a direct counterpart to the helrunan (163) the

devilish confederates of Grendel. They have invested Beowulf with noble virtues of the Geatish people and only now he begins to emerge as an individual though still representative figure.

While the dramatic encounters of the Geats on their way to Heorot reveal new aspects of Beowulf's character that gradually separate him from the other men, the speeches themselves and the narrative passages between the speeches emphasize the close unity of the group. Although the Geats' voyage to Denmark clearly begins with one man's daring will and initiative, no individual stands out in the poet's description of the crossing. The Geats are seen together simply as weras on wilsio (216), men on a willing venture. The coastwatchman, who is first impressed by the open confidence of the group then by the conspicuous strength of Beowulf, speaks to the Geats as a whole in his initial challenge (237-57),

Hwaet syndon gē. . . ,

in his reply to Beowulf's answer (287-300),

ic ēow wisāge. . . ,

and in his parting benediction (316-19),

Fæder alwalda
mid ārstafum eowic gehealde.

The coastwatch uses only plural forms of the pronoun "you" when he speaks to the Geats. The hero's individuality only begins to emerge in this first challenge and when the Geats set off on the march to Heorot the adverbial emphasis is once again on the group's "togetherness":

Guman ōnetton/sigon ætsomne (306-7)

[the warriors hastened, marched together]

. . . stig wīsoðe/gumum ætgædere (320-1)

[the path showed the way to the men together]

. . . gāras stōdon
sæmanna searo samod ætgædere (328-9)

[spears, seamen's weapons, stood together]

Slightly more of Beowulf's individuality as a character is drawn out by Wulfgar's challenge to the Geatish troop at the door of Heorot. When Beowulf answers the challenge by proudly giving his name, the herald speaks to him directly using singular pronouns. However, when Wulfgar reports to Hrothgar there is, as Irving has pointed out,³ a notable shifting back and forth from singular to plural, from individual to group: Hēr syndon geferede. . . Gēata lēode, Geatish people have journeyed here. . . þone yldestan. . . Beowulf nemnað, the leader is called Beowulf. . . hȳ bēnan synt/þæt hie. . . wið þē mōton/ wordum wrixlan, they ask that they be allowed to exchange words with you. . . hȳ. . . wyrðe þinceað, they seem worthy. . . huru sē aldor deah,/sē þām heaðorincum hider wisade, indeed the prince is strong who lead the warriors here (361-70). Hrothgar's reply to Wulfgar reveals even more detailed personal knowledge of Beowulf, but the king's invitation is extended to the Geats to come into the hall in company, samod ætgædere (387). And after Wulfgar repeats the invitation (using the plural pronoun gē, 393,395) the Geats, we are

told, snyredon ætsomne (402), hastened together, under Heorot's roof. The same pattern is repeated with Beowulf's introductory speech to Hrothgar. The dramatic focus is now centred squarely on Beowulf as he frankly professes his heroic character and states his firm resolve to destroy Grendel, but at the end of the speech the poet once again widens the focus to include the other Geats:

þā wæs Gēat-mæcgum geador ætsomne
on bēor-sele benc gerymed (491-2)

[Then a bench was cleared in the beer
hall for the men of the Geats all together.]

As each challenge and response reveals a little more of the hero's character, the poet is careful to emphasize that the Geats are acting in unison towards a common goal.

One result of the poet's emphasis on plural pronouns and adverbs that express unified action is that on the way to Heorot the Geats help to characterize Beowulf without acting as a "foil or contrasting background"⁴ that sets him apart. There is great contrast in this part of the poem but it is between the brilliantly arrayed Geatish troop who come openly and samod ætgædere to cleanse Heorot, and Grendel the atol āngengea (165), the terrible lone-goer, who comes to the hall silently by night to commit his crimes āna wið eallum (146), one against all.

A new aspect in our developing knowledge of the Geats is added by Hrothgar's welcoming speech. The impression of

untarnished nobility that has been created so far by the descriptions of the Geatish weras on wilsioð, men on a willing venture (216), is modified by Hrothgar's recollections of the way Beowulf's father came to Heorot years ago. The present arrival of the Geats provoked Wulfgar (in the previous scene) to say,

Wēn'ic þæt gē for wlenco, nalles for wræcsiðum,
ac for higeþrymmum Hrōðgār sōhton (338-9)

[I expect that you have come to see Hrothgar out of pride and greatness of spirit, not because of exile.]

But Hrothgar remembers that Beowulf's father once sought him under much less favourable circumstances.

For gewyrhtum þū wine mīn Bēowulf,
ond for ārstafum ūsic sōhtest.
Geslōh þīn fæder fæhðe mæste;
wearp hē Heapolāfe tō handbonan 75
mid Wilfingum; ðā hine Wergara cyn⁵
for here-brōgan habban ne mihte. (457-62)

[For deeds done, my friend Beowulf, and for past favours you have sought us. Your father brought about the greatest feud when he became the slayer of Heatholaf among the Wylfings. After that the race of wolf-men might not keep him for fear of war.]

Although Ecgtheow at this time may have been the son-in-law⁶ of the Geats' king he was forced to seek refuge with the South-Danes. Moreover it seems that obligations were laid upon him, as Hrothgar reminds the hero:

Siððan þā fæhðe fēo þingode;
sende ic Wylfingum ofer wæteres hrycg
ealde mādmas; hē mē āpas swōr. (470-2)

[Afterwards I paid money to settle the feud;
over the water's back I sent old treasures
to the Wylfings; he swore oaths to me.]

In these oblique hints of "war-terror", of feud and the payment of tribute there is the suggestion of a darker history behind the present appearance of the Geats. A perspective is developed by the contrast between their present wilsið and the story of Ecgtheow's exile that helps to bring out the true significance of what they are doing now. At the same time we learn that the poet has begun their drama in medias res, and that we still know very little of the Geatish background.

On the other hand, the proud traditions associated with Heorot provide a slightly ironic context for a third and final challenge to the Geats. Unferth unexpectedly interrupts the scene of hæleða drēam (497) following Hrothgar's welcome to accuse Beowulf of vain and idle boasting in his pledge to cleanse Heorot. His antagonism expresses his own latent jealousy and the frustration of the Danes who fear that the Geats may succeed where they have failed. The only aspect of this scene which concerns us is the pattern of contrast between the Geats and the Danes that begins at this point (with Beowulf's reply) and continues through both fights against the Grendel kin.

Unferth's rudeness provokes Beowulf to reply that the Danish spokesman's most daring exploit was the murder of his own brothers, and to suggest (by the way the thoughts come to

his mind) that this lack of moral authority is the cause of the Danes' failure to rid Heorot of Grendel.

Secge ic þē tō sōðe, sunu Ecglāfes,
 þæt nāfre Grendel swā fela gryra gefremede,
 atol æglæca ealdre þīnum,
 hȳnðo on Heorote, gif þīn hige wære,
 sefa swā searo-grim, swā þū self talast. (590-4)

[I tell you truly son of Ecglaf, that Grendel, awful monster, would never have performed so many terrible deeds against your prince, humiliation in Heorot, if your spirit, your heart, were as fierce in fight as you claim.]

Beowulf's anger gives way to bitter sarcasm as he points out with exaggerated heroic diction that Grendel

. . . hafað onfunden, þæt hē þā fæhðe ne þearf,
 atole ecg-þræce ēower lēode
 swiðe onsittan, Sige-Scyldinga; (595-7)

[. . . has discovered that he need not much fear the hostility, not much dread the terrible sword-storm of your people, the Victory-Scyldings. . .]

The speech reaches a climax as Beowulf makes a direct comparison between the fighting spirit of the Danes and the Geats.

. . . secce ne wēneþ
 tō Gārdenum. Ac ic him Gēata sceal
 eafoð ond ellen ungeāra nū,
 gūþe gebēodan. (600-3)

[He expects no fight from the Spear-Danes. But I will show him very soon now the strength and courage and warfare of the Geats.]

The contrast in spirit between the two peoples is "reinforced"⁷ by the alliteration of "Gardenum" with "Geata" (601). The use of the word "Gardenum" also suggests for the reader an ironic echo of the opening lines of the poem with their celebration of Scylding courage.

Although with this speech Unferth and the Danes begin to function as dramatic foils for Beowulf and the Geats, the poet notes later (1166-7) that Unferth has a genuine reputation for valour, and he also speaks with great admiration of the Danes, wæs se þeod tilu (1250), that was a good nation. The purpose of this final challenge is to show that Hrothgar's men are simply unequal to the task that the Geats have undertaken.

Later, as the Danes seek elsewhere a bed for the night leaving the Geats to defend the hall, and as the action rises to the death-struggle with Grendel, we are given a more definite contrasting of the two nations. While the North-Danes, cēnra gehwylcum (768), each of the "bold ones", stand outside the hall in atelic egesa (784), horrible fear, the Geatish troop swarm around the contending "renweardas".

þaēr genehost brægd
 eorl Bēowulfes ealde lāfe,
 wolde frēa-drihtnes feorh ealgian,
 mǣres þeodnes, ðaēr hie meahton swā; (794-97)

[There often enough an earl of Beowulf
 drew an old sword; they wished to protect
 the life of their dear lord, famous prince,
 however they might]

No trace of cowardice appears in the Geats' steadfast defense of Beowulf's life.

In the next reference to the Geats, at the celebration of victory over Grendel, the poet opens a vista into the future with the sudden foreshadowing of Hygelac's death on the Rhine.

þone hring hæfde Higelāc Gēata,
 nefa Swertinges, nȳhstan sīðe,
 siðþan hē under segne sinc ealgode,
 wael-rēaf werede; hyne wyrd fornam,
 syððan hē for wlenco wēan āhsode,
 fæhðe to Frȳsum; (1202-7)

[Hygelac of the Geats, the kinsman of Swerting, had the ring on his last voyage when he protected the treasure under his banner, defended the booty of battle; fate carried him off, when out of pride he looked for trouble, in battle with the Frisians.]

This passage is superimposed upon a scene of victorious feasting, of splendid treasure giving; and, almost as it were, behind the backs of the revelling warriors, we are shown a slaughter field covered with Geatish corpses.

wyrsan wīgfreca wael rēafeden
 æfter gūðsceare, Gēata lēode
 hrēawīc hēoldon. (1212-15)

[After the battle slaughter lesser warriors plundered the dead--the people of the Geats--ruled the place of corpses.]

The brevity and detachment of this "second sight" comes like a chilling wind into the poet's description of the feast. And the phrase--hē for wlenco wēan āhsode--suggesting tragic hubris reveals an aspect of the Geats that is strangely portentous in their moment of triumph. For Hygelac's pride, like that of Byrhtnoth at Maldon is excessive and magnificent, yet tragic contradiction rests in the image of "lesser warriors" plundering the Geatish corpses.

In the encounter with Grendel's mother the Geats are again set apart from the weary, disheartened Danes. Waiting

on the holm-clife at the place where Æschere's skull was found, they alone endure the ninth hour of the day, staring on the darkened water where Grendel had gone to seek dēofla gedræg, the company of devils. There is a certain air of saintliness about the Geats as they await the hero, a stylistic reversal of the more conventional "heroism" of the apostles who stand by during the harrowing of Hell in Cynewulf's Christ B (94-107). But even while the Geats are in this passive role, as the scene shifts from the fierce action under the mere to the men waiting on the cliff, the poet draws an ironic contrast between the Geats and the Danes. When the surging waves become blood-stained and troubled, Hrothgar and his snottre ceorlas assume that Beowulf has perished.

Naes ofgēafon
hwate Scyldingas; gewāt him hām þonon
gold-wine gūmena. (1600-2)

[The bold Scyldings deserted the hill.
The gold-friend of warriors went back
to his home.]

But the Geats do not at this time desert their lord.

Gistas sētan
mōdes sēoce ond on mere stædon;
wīston ond ne wēdon, þæt hīe heora winedrihten
selfne gesāwon. (1602-5)

[The strangers sat sick at heart and stared
on the mere. They wished and did not expect
that they would see their beloved lord
himself.]

The poet's use of the word "gistas"--guests--rather than say "Geatas" underlines, I think, the dramatic separation of the

two nations. The contrast is brought to completion when we are shown, on one hand, the Geats' anxious concern giving way to joy as Beowulf reappears and they rush to remove the armour from their victorious prince:

ðrȳðlīc þegna hēap, þēodnes gefēgon,
þæs þe hi hyne gesundne gesēon mōston. (1627-8)

[The strong band of thanes rejoiced in their
prince that they might see him again sound.]

On the other hand, the Danes who have already returned to the drinking at Heorot are thrown into wide-eyed surprise as the Geats appear, cynningbalde (1634), bold as kings, dragging Grendel's head across the floor.

The Geats' unexpected change in fortune prompts a speech by Hrothgar (1700-89) that is important because in both subject and mood it anticipates a time beyond the symblewynne (1782), the delightful feast of the present. Hrothgar's predictions that Beowulf will rule the Geats (1707-9, 1845-53), his austere exemplum on the philosophy of wise kingship (1709-68), and particularly his own experience with the coming of edwenden (1774), of sudden, unexpected change, are all important sign-posts aimed towards the second part of the poem. Portentous as well is the reflective mood of the Danish king pondering at nightfall man's precarious place in þās lānan gesceaft (1622).

In the morning sunlight, the Geats, fūse tō fareenne (1805), eager to set forth, gather in front of the high seat to

take leave of Hrothgar. The focus of attention alternates between Beowulf (1799-1802, 1806-12, 1814-16) and the Geats (1803-05, 1813-14). The similarity of this scene to that of their arrival rounds out their sojourn in Denmark and brings their accomplishment into relief. The initial pledge that was made to Hrothgar and the Danes,

þæt ic mōte āna ond mīnra eorla gedryht,
þes hearda hēap, Heorot fælsian (431-2)

[that alone with my company of earls,
this band of hardy men, I may cleanse
Heorot]

has been fulfilled. By destroying the monsters, Beowulf has repaid Hrothgar's former kindness to his father; but in his parting speech, Beowulf looks to the future and offers his own service and the massive support of the Geats if Hrothgar should ever again "have need of men."

Gif ic þæt gefricge ofer flōða begang,
þæt þec ymb-sittend egesan þȳwað,
swā þec hetende hwīlum dydon,
ic ðē þūsenda þegna bringe,
hælepa tō helpe. Ic on Higelāce wāt,
Gēata dryhten, þēah ðe hē geong sȳ,
folces hyrde, þæt hē mec fremman wile
wordum ond weorcum. . . (1826-33)

[If over the sea's expanse I hear that
neighbouring people threaten you with
terrors as those who hated you did before,
I shall bring you a thousand thanes, war-
riors to your aid. I know that Hygelac,
the Lord of the Geats, though he be young,
guardian of the people, will further me with
words and deeds. . .]

These are the warriors whose corpses will cover the slaughter field near the Rhine on Hygelac's last expedition. Beowulf's

youthful expectations of future greatness are undercut by our knowledge of Hygelac's destiny, a knowledge which makes the hero's confidence in his lord all the more heartening and pathetic.

Hrothgar's reply to Beowulf's parting speech alludes to former strife between Danes and Geats and widens our knowledge of the Geats.

Hafast þū gefēred, þæt þām folcum sceal,
 Gēata lēodum ond Gār-Denum
 sib gemæneond sacu restan,
 inwit-nīpas, þe hīe ær drugon,
 wesān, þenden ic wealde wīdan rīces,
 mǣpmas gemæne . . . (1855-1860)

[You have brought it about that peace shall be shared by the peoples, the folk of the Geats and the Spear-Danes and enmity shall sleep, acts of malice which they practiced before; and there shall be, as long as I rule the broad kingdom, sharing of treasures.]

The immediate purpose of Hrothgar's speech is not only to reveal an obscure past but to emphasize the present nobility of the Geats who have come despite ancient enmity to honour Ecgtheow's debt of allegiance.

Ic þā lēode wāt
 gē wið fēond gē wið frēond fæstegeworhte,
 æghwæs untæle ealde wīsan. (1863-65)

[I know your people, blameless in every respect, set firm after the old way both as to foe and to friend.]

Hrothgar's vision of a world living in concord and harmony ofer ganotes bæð (1861), and his statement that peace shall last, þenden ic wealde wīdan rīces (1859), as long as I rule

the broad kingdom, are as ironical as Beowulf's promise to return if need be with Hygelac's troops. We can only wonder how long it will be before the fācen-stafas (1018), the treasonous plots hinted at by Wealtheow, reveal the vanity of Hrothgar's wishes.

It must seem a long time in Hrothgar's memory since the days of his youth when he was given "success in warfare, glory in battle";

þæt him his winemāgas
georne hȳrdon, oððæt sēo geogoð gewēox
mago-driht micel. (65-67)

[so that his retainers gladly obeyed him
and their company grew into a great band
of warriors.]

The Geats in Denmark have been a reminder for him of those warriors for whom Heorot was built. They appear in the first part of the poem as a dramatization of the comitatus as it should be, in contrast to the present rather factious and discouraged courtiers of the old king. The poet has made it clear that the Geats owe their success in Denmark to the mutual love and support between the leader and his men. When they waited in Heorot for the coming of Grendel, we were told that:

Nāenig heora þōhte, þæt hē þanon scolde
eft eard-lufan æfre gesēcean,
folc oððe frēo-burh, þær hē āfēded wæs,
ac hīe hæfdon gefrūnen, þæt hīe ær tō fela micles
in þām wīn-sele wæl-dēað fornam,
Denigea lēode;. . . (691-6)

[None of them thought that he would ever again seek from there his dear home, people or town where he was raised; for they had heard that bloody death had carried off far too many men in the wine-hall, folk of the Danes.]

Nevertheless, when Beowulf and Grendel were locked in combat, the Geatish earls were at once ready to defend their prince's life, "however they might," by hewing at the monster from every side. On the other hand, Beowulf's concern for the welfare of his men was shown before his venture against Grendel's mother when he reminded Hrothgar of something they had spoken of before, that;

gif ic æt þearfe þīnre scolde
aldre linnan, þæt ðū mē ā wære
forð-gewitenum on fæder stæle.
Wes þū mund-bora mīnum mago-þegnum,
hond-gesellum, gif mec hild nime; (1477-81)

[If in your cause I should go from life,
you would always be in a father's place
to me when I am gone. Be a guardian to
my retainers, my companions, if battle
should take me.]

But the Geatish esprit de corps, which gave them victory where the Danes had failed, stems ultimately, as A.G. Brodeur has pointed out,⁸ from one man, Hygelac the king, in whose name all of Beowulf's exploits have been undertaken. The allusions to the Geatish past and the foreshadowing of Hygelac's death early in the poem set up a counter-current of foreboding which plays against the hopeful prospects that are developed by Beowulf and Hrothgar's parting speeches. As the Geats set out from Heorot to seek their lēode swaese (1868) their well-loved nation, Hrothgar weeps knowing how unlikely it is that he and Beowulf would ever meet again as mōdige on meþle (1876), proud ones in the meeting place.

The Geats' homeward voyage functions as a dramatic frame circumscribing the events in Denmark, separating the growing mood of apprehension in Heorot from the clearer, more outward-looking spirit of the men returning in triumph to Hygelac's court. The language and imagery of the voyage celebrate sense and youthful energy. We see the wind tug at the sail, we hear in "sund wudu punede" (1906) the hollow sound of feet on a wooden deck and we sense effortless speed as the ship flies like a dolphin or a sea-bird over the moving water. Momentum built up by the verbs in cēol up geþrang/lyft-geswenced (1912-3) is suddenly brought to rest by the phrase on lande stōd (1913). A Geatish coastwatchman rushes to greet the leofra manna (1915), the beloved men, indicating at once by this simple action the warm, open spirit of the place.

The description of Hygelac's court to which the Geats now turn is given abstractly in terms of the splendid qualities of the rulers, its aristocratic temper, its refinement and courtly demeanour. In contrast to the vivid picture of Heorot we know only that Hygelac dwelt with his companions near the sea-wall and that

Bold wæs bētlīc bregorōf cyning (1925)

[The building was splendid, its king
most valiant]

Such economy, so disappointing perhaps to those looking for a Bædecker of ancient monuments, fulfills the dramatic intent of the poet which is to heighten the contrast between what we

have been shown of Hygelac in battle on the Rhine, and the picture now before us. To do this, to raise the anticipation of the audience to know this man whose valour commands the unquestioning loyalty of these troops now before us marching up the strand, yet whose vaulting ambition leads as we have seen to the slaughter field covered with Geatish corpses, the poet turns in a long discourse on courtly manners to characterize Hygelac's queen. Hygd, we are told, though young and inexperienced, was "wise", "high-minded", and she was not petty nor "too sparing of gifts to the Geatish people". Her warmth and openhandedness are contrasted at some length to the character of a certain Modþryðe whose wicked custom was to have her suitors put to death before she was sent as a bride to Offa, king of the Angles, who apparently tamed her shrewish temper. Far from spoiling the suspense, this picture of Hygelac's young queen who keeps the homefires burning, innocent of the foreknowledge that we have been given, adds a premonition of coming sorrow to the otherwise triumphant arrival of the Geats.

When Homer tells of the arrival of Odysseus at the palace of Alcinous there is no such ambivalence in our response, no sense of the impending destiny that we feel in the drama of the Geats. In a moment of hesitation as Odysseus pauses on the threshold of the Phæacian court, the poet turns in a long digression to describe in rich and "uniformly illuminated" ⁹.

detail the beauty of the palace. The wanderer can see in "a kind of radiance like that of the sun or the moon" bronze walls stretching to left and right topped with blue enamel tiles; within the courtyard, on high backed chairs draped in figured cloth the nobles sit to the feast while maids grind apple-golden corn, or weave at the loom, or sit and twist the yarn, "their hands fluttering like the tall poplar's leaves;"¹⁰ beyond this, the four acre orchard blooms with pears and pomegranates, apples, figs and olives; grapes are drying in the sun or being trodden while other clusters hang ripening on the vines. Any misgivings felt by the wanderer (or by Homer's audience) have, by the end of the digression, entirely disappeared. "Stalwart Odysseus," we are told, "stood before the house and eyed the scene. When he had enjoyed all its beauty, he stepped briskly over the threshold and entered the palace."¹¹ The purpose of such digressions in the Odyssey as Auerbach has shown,¹² is to present a glittering surface, so captivating in itself that nothing from the past, no concern for the future, intrudes upon our enjoyment of the present. In Beowulf, on the other hand, these passages are meant to accumulate, to remain "vibrant in the background," creating a perspective which colours our response to each new aspect of the drama.

And so in the scene of the Geats' arrival at Hygelac's court, by reminding us of what has gone before, the poet draws

together the threads of his design. As the troops stride to where they have heard that "the protector of earls," "the slayer of Ongentheow," "the noble young war-king" is dispensing treasure in the stronghold; the sun, the old symbol of victory is now seen hastening from the south, sigel sūðan fus (1966), to suggest perhaps with the poet's insight the transience of their brief, deceptive glory. Hygelac at this time is at the zenith of his power. His nobility and valour are stressed in the variations heaped up before his name, and something of his generosity is noted when the poet speaks of his holding court in terms of hringas dælan (1970). The "pride" mentioned by the poet earlier in the poem (1206) is clearly not the sort of self-love that struck down Heremod of the Scyldings; it is, if anything, rather the excess of those qualities most admired by a company of heroes: courage and indomitable will. The warmth of the welcome ordered for the returning men--

Hraðe wæs gerymed, swā sē rīca bebēad,
fēðe-gestum flet innanweard. (1975-6)

[Quickly the hall within was made clear for
the foot-guests, as the mighty one bade.]

is as much a part of Hygelac's character as his kingly interest in the affairs of men and the world:

. . . hyne fyrwet bræc,
hwylce Sæ-Geata siðas wæron (1985-6)

[Curiosity pressed him, what the adventures
of the Sea-Geats had been]

A high courtly manner is suggested when Beowulf, seated mæg wið mæge, kinsman opposite kinsman, ceremoniously greets his lord purh hlēoðor-cwyde, with formal speech, while the queen moves through the hall bringing mead-cups to the Geats. The poet balances the formality of Beowulf's greeting by dwelling on the bond of love between the two kinsmen. Hygelac it seems was not one of those who urged on the venture:

Ic ðæs mōd-ceare
sorh-wylmum sēað, sīðe ne truwode
lēofes mannes; ic ðē lange bæd,
þæt ðū þone wæl-gæst wihte ne grētte,
lete suð-Dene sylfe geweorðan
gūðe wið Grendel. (1992-97)

[Because of you I burned with seething sorrows, care of heart--had no trust in the venture of my beloved man. I entreated you long that you should in no way approach the murderous spirit--let the South-Danes themselves settle the war with Grendel.]

The allegiance between lord and man is voluntary, based on a mutual trust and affection. The adventurous man-at-arms bearing news and goodwill from abroad is now once again the loyal retainer--the best of thanes. And although Beowulf and Hygelac are in uncle-nephew relationship, there is here no suggestion of suhterge-fæderan conflict such as that which troubles the fellowship of Heorot.

Beowulf, like the travelling player in Hamlet, now recounts for his uncle "the abstract and brief chronicles of the time" in Denmark. It is interesting enough and rather pleasant to hear an account of the fight with the Grendel kin

from the hero's own point of view and to hear of the marriage of Hrothgar's daughter to Ingeld, king of the Heathobards. In this complex historical situation our concern is with Beowulf's insight into a series of events which (because of Hygelac's fall) will contribute ultimately to the destruction of the Geats. Although the death of Hygelac has been foreshadowed for the audience, Beowulf cannot foresee the wreck of his own future, yet the oncoming disaster in Denmark seems all too clear to him. Beowulf we learn has little hope that Hrothgar's marital bargaining will settle the feud with Ingeld.

ond þæt ræd talað,
þæt hē mid ðy wīfe wælfæhða dæl,
sæcca gesette. Oft seldan hwær
æfter lēod-hryre lýtle hwīle
bon-gār būgeð, þeah sēo brȳd duge! (2027-31)

[. . . and he considers it advisable that with this woman he settle their portion of deadly feuds, of quarrels. Yet it is seldom anywhere that the deadly spear rests for any length of time after the death of a prince, even though the bride be worthy.]

To explain how this general rule will apply in Hrothgar's case, Beowulf illustrates his commentary by unfolding--like a play within a play--an account of the very moment when the downfall of the Scyldings would begin. Beowulf imagines (as a possibility) the wrath of an "old spear-warrior", a Heathobard veteran whose heart is so steeped in the bitterness of ancient defeats, so galled by the sight of his comrades' weapons now worn by the Danish men, that he provokes one of Ingeld's young thanes to murder the attendant of the Danish bride.

Even if the murderer escapes Beowulf foresees that retribution would be inevitable and that when the crime is avenged the alliance will be broken. Beowulf concludes by saying:

þȳ ic Heaðobearna hyldo ne telge
dryht-sibbe dǣl Denum unfǣcne
frēondscipe fǣstne. (2067-69)

therefore I do not reckon much of the
friendship and loyalty of the Heatho-
bards to the Danes to be without deceit, [nor]
the alliance secure

As Beowulf reports on the affairs of the world, the Geatish court seems more and more a sanctuary surrounded by a turbid flow of chaos and deceit. There is no mention in Beowulf's report of the secret enmity that Hrothulf holds for Hrothgar alluded to by the poet (1015-19, 1162-5) during the scene of the great feast at Heorot. We know from the Widsith-poet's summary that Hrothulf's treason against his uncle did not come to the surface until some time after they fought together against Ingeld in defence of Heorot.

Hroþwulf and Hroðgar heoldon lengest
sibbe ætsome, suhtor fædran,
sibban hy forwæcon Wicinga cynn
& Ingeldes ord forbigdan,
forheowan æt Heorote Heaðobeardna prym (45-49) 13

Hrothwulf and Hrothgar held friendship
together longest, nephew and uncle, after
they drove away the tribe of Wic-dwellers
and lowered Ingeld's spear, cut to pieces
at Heorot the army of the Heathobards.

The contrast between the two sets of kinsmen remains unstated in the background, a part of the vaguely menacing outer world where ignorant armies clash by night.

As if to underline the rare tenor of the Geats' relationship the poet lets Beowulf sum up his own part in the Danish venture by saying,

þær ic, þēoden min, þin lēode
weorðode weorcum, (2095-6)

[I did honour to your people there,
my prince, with my deeds.]

The giving of treasures by Beowulf and the magnificent rewards bestowed on him by Hygelac are cited by the poet as the ideal of generosity. The four treasures are mentioned in the same order as they were at Hrothgar's court, but they are described much more simply. The emphasis here is on heroic behavior and the virtues of loyalty, generosity and wisdom. The spirit of the treasure-giving is broadened by the gnomic lines:

Swā sceal mæg dōn,
nealles inwit-net ōðrum bregdon
dyrnum cræfte, dēað rēnian
hond-gesteallan. (2166-69)

[So ought kinsmen to do, not weave
malice-nets for each other with
secret-craft, prepare death for
comrades.]

When this is followed by the assurance that to Hygelac, stout in battle, his nephew was "very loyal", each was mindful of the other's benefit, and that Beowulf, though a man brave in bold deeds, lived honourably, "in no wise slew his hearth-companions in drunkenness," it becomes clear that the poet is describing the spiritual milieu against which the action of the second part must be judged.

So far we have considered ten of the sixteen passages in which the poet directs our attention towards the drama of the Geats. The pattern created up to this point is a long upward curve of achievement¹⁴ as Beowulf and the Geats surmount one challenge after another on their journey until they return to Hygelac's court. The hero and his people complement each other in developing this pattern, but the role of the Geats is much more complex than that of a set of helpers in the story of a quest hero. The references to the Geats work in four ways to create the dramatic unity through which the hero moves in the first part of the poem.

The first references to the Geats provide the hero with a social context in which to act, and a problem to be solved not for personal vanity but for the benefit of other men. The wise men who urge on the venture against Grendel and the warriors who are with Beowulf symbolize a community of will and effort from which the hero gradually emerges as an individual and to which he returns bringing honour and victory. The imagery of the Geats' voyage to Denmark and the scenes of their arrival establish the basic contrasts of the drama and broaden the scope and significance of the conflict. The Geatish troop, with Beowulf marching among them (but not yet distinguished as a hero) appear as an extension of national will, linked together in common purpose like the still

untarnished rings of a mail shirt. Later, after the Danes have scattered at nightfall in expectation of Grendel's attack, and while Beowulf considers aloud the challenge he has accepted as Hygelac's mæg ond magoðegn (408); the Geatish warriors gathered around him are thinking of home, of the people and the town where they were raised--an image that brings to mind the source of their moral courage and the high purpose of their venture. Finally when the Grendel kin are destroyed and the Geats return to Hygelac's court, the entire story of their adventure is presented by the hero to the king as a gift which brings honour to his people. When we compare the reasons for Beowulf's actions to the problems of Achilles, a man caught in a minor injustice, or Roland, torn by a question of personal honour, the importance of the social context in the poem becomes apparent.

The references to the Geats also reveal aspects of the hero's character. "While Beowulf clearly rises above the many warriors who surround him, in such passages [as the challenges on the way to Heorot] they seem also to be in part reflections of his power and sounding boards for his heroic qualities. The hero is extended and amplified by surrounding mirrors."¹⁵ Tacitus describes the way a hero's men could become a reflection of his character:

"Dignity and power alike consist in being continually attended by a corps of chosen youths. This gives one

consideration in peace-time and security in war. Nor is it only in a man's own nation that he can win name and fame by the superior number and quality of his companions, but in neighbouring states as well." 16

The most important part of Beowulf's character of course is his willingness to act as the keen, hard spearpoint of his nation's will. This quality, expressed by the bond between Beowulf and his men, does not change in the first part of the poem, although we have the impression that the hero and the Geats are "finding themselves" as different situations reveal new aspects of their character. The fights against the Grendel kin, for example, reveal in a deeper sense the unity and esprit de corps of the Geats in contrast to the Danes who scatter or give up before the battle is over.

Blomfield remarks that "by comparisons we are shown Beowulf's nature, by searchlights into the past and future we are to sense the magnitude and true import of his achievements."¹⁷ Two of these "searchlights" are the references to Ecgtheow's flight into exile at Heorot (456-72) and to Hygelac's ill-starred foray on the Rhine (1202-14). Together these references create a perspective, a dramatic frame of past and future that brings the clear temper of the Geats' present venture into relief. And these apparently disconnected events in turn become significant as key moments in the course of the hero's life.

Finally, there are passages which "knit together"¹⁸ elements of Geatish and Danish experience and help to unify the

dramatic pattern. In the scenes of feasting at Heorot and at Hygelac's court Beowulf is drawn into the tragedy of the Scylding's first by Wealtheow's appeal for protection for her sons, by his later offer to Hrothgar of Geatish military support, and finally by his report to Hygelac of the expected war with Ingeld. On the other hand, scenes of feasting also connect the allusion to Hygelac's death with Hrothgar's discourse on the nature of the good king and his prediction that Beowulf will some day rule the Geats. The last feast at Heorot develops as well the theme of unexpected change, of gyrn æfter gomene (1775), grief after joy, which so strongly anticipates the second part of the poem.

THE DRAMA OF THE GEATS, PART II

In the swift passage of more than fifty years the scene shifts from the brightness of Hygelac's court to a dark landscape and the running figure of a slave. The peripetia of the Hrethlings has been sudden and complete: Hygelac and Heardred have fallen in the crashes of battle; and Beowulf, we are told, ruled for fifty winters, a wise old guardian of the kingdom,

Oððæt ān ongan
deorcum nihtum draca rīcsian, (2210-11)

[until a certain one, a dragon, began
to rule in the dark nights]

The line of Geatish kings has passed as swiftly as the flight of a sparrow through a hall. Now there is a mood of uncanny nightmare in the running of this slave across the high heath clutching a precious cup stolen from the barrow where a dragon is awakening after its centuries-long sleep. The sense of contrast and unexpected wyrd conveyed by the mise en scène is heightened by the insignificance of this fugitive on pære wēstenne (2298) in the wilderness whose action brings about the burning of Beowulf's court now bolda sēlest (2326)--just as long ago the destruction of Heorot was ignited by the anger of a nameless Heathobard veteran. Gæð ā wyrd swā hīo scel (455)--fate always goes as it must. But before turning to the

matter of the second part of the poem--the way Beowulf meets his inevitable death and the corresponding steps which bring together his fate and that of his nation--the poet tells a story set in a darker antiquity of the last survivor of the noble race who once owned the treasures of the dragon hoard.

The last survivor, wine-geōmor (2239), mourning his friends and waiting for death, places the richest part of his treasure in the hoard; then he speaks of the contrast between death and earthly joy, the transience of human life. The ponderous rhythms and long mournful vowel sounds of the survivor's first words disclose the touch of hopeless melancholy that this theme has wrought upon him:

Heald þū nū, hrūse, nū hæleð ne mōstan,
eorla æhte! (2247-8)

[Hold now, Earth, now that men may not, the
possession of earls]

These ancient treasures (2232) that the speaker places in the earth are the last mute reminders of the people who once owned them. The time required for the passing of their civilization, the society these long-gestrēona (2240), long-accumulated treasures represent, stretches immeasurably into the past compared to the lȳtel fæc (2240), the little while, that the survivor has left to enjoy the hoard.¹ The contrast of past and present is suggested as well by the stillness of the weapons and armour around the speaker. Now there is the silence of a rusting corselet instead of the crashing of shields in battle.

. . . ge swylce sēo herepād, sio æt hilde gebād
ofer borda gebræc bite īrena,
broснаð æfter beorne; (2258-60)

[And even so the coat of mail, which withstood
the bite of swords after the crashing of the
shields, decays like its warrior]

The balanced rhythms and the parallel syntactic structures of
the last lines of the elegy evoke images of a lost world, a
world where the things of man rust and perish.

. . . ne mæg byrnan hring
æfter wīg-fruman wīde fēran
hæleðum be healfe. Næs hearpan wyn,
gomen glēo-bēames, nē gōd hafoc
geond sæl swingeð, nē se swifta mearh
burh-stede bēateð. . . (2260-65)

[Nor may the ringmail travel wide on the
war-chief beside his warriors. There is
no harp-delight, no mirth of the singing
wood, no good hawk flies through the hall,
no swift horse stamps in the courtyard. . .]

The speaker's sense of personal loss changes finally into a
lament for all nations lost in the passage of time:

Bealo-cwealm hafað
fela feorh-cynna forð onsended! (2265-6)

[Baleful death has sent away many races
of men.]

The hringa hyrde (2245), "the keeper of the rings", speaks
from the most distant past about nations whom men have for-
gotten, yet his elegy is placed at this point in the poem to
serve as a prophecy of the fate in store for the Geats. As
their last great king prepares hrēow on hreðre (2328), in
anguish of spirit to face the dragon, the mood of the elegy
remains as a suggestive, "unexpressed, background quality"²

countering our hopes as the main action unfolds.

Beowulf's careful preparations for the dragon's fight show that the passage of time has only seasoned his courage and strengthened his willingness to serve as a champion against se ðēodsceaða (2278), the enemy of the people. The usual hope of an audience that the hero would survive has been undercut by the poet's repeated foretelling of his imminent death. We were told (by the preterite verb tenses) at the beginning of the second part of the poem that Beowulf's long reign was in fact already over:

. . . hē gehēold tela
fiftig wintra, wæs ðā frōd cyning,
eald ēþelweard. oð ðæt ān ongan
deorcum nihtum draca ricsian (2208-11)

[He (i.e. Beowulf) ruled well for fifty winters, he was a wise king, an old guardian of the land--until a certain one, a dragon, began to rule in the dark nights.]

After the poet has turned back in time to describe the outbreak of the dragon's anger, he rushes ahead within the space of one sentence to indicate the war's conclusion.

Waes se fruma egeslīc
lēodum on lande, swā hyt lungre wearð
on hyra sincgifan sāre geendod. (2309-11)

[The beginning was terrible to the people in the land, as on their treasure-giver it was soon to be sorely ended.]

Not only is the hero's death foretold from the outset, but the dragon's fate is revealed with the same ironic detachment:

. . . beorges getruwode,
wīges ond wealles; him sēo wēn geleāh. (2322-23)

[he trusted in his barrow, in his valour
and his wall, his hope deceived him.]

And again, as Beowulf prepares an iron shield for protection against the dragon's flames, the poet points out that neither the hero nor the dragon will survive the battle.

Sceolde lāendaga
æþeling ærgōd ende gebīdan,
worulde līfes, ond se wyrm somod,
þēah ðe hordwelan hēolde lange. (2341-44)

[The prince good from earliest times
must endure the end of his borrowed days
of life in the world, and the dragon as
well, though he had kept hoarded wealth
for a long time.]

By these statements of the outcome, the poet indicates his point of view. He has abandoned chronological time in order to view the action on Beowulf's endedæg in the context of the time surrounding it on all sides. Historical vistas, grouped around or radiating out from the central point of the hero's death day, reveal (as the main action unfolds) the dark surrounding drama of the Geats. Our concern now is to examine the way different moments in time relate to the central action, and to consider some of the implications of this complex perspective.

The last day of Beowulf's life is the culmination of his experience as sigoreādig secg (2352), the victory-blessed man. We are told that he chose to fight alone against the dragon because since the purging of Heorot he had come through many

battles by his own strength. This motif, that Beowulf in times past had survived many a hard fight, affords a transition to the first of the historical vistas which open out from the central action. As the hero readies himself to walk over the heath to the dragon barrow, the poet appears to withdraw to a point from which he can survey, as if from a great distance, the dark landscape of events that Beowulf crossed on his way to the throne.

The poet's retrospect begins at the turning point of the hero's life and of his nation's destiny: Hygelac's disastrous venture on the Rhine.

Nō þæt lāsest wæs
hond-gemōta, þær mon Hygelāc slōh,
syððan Gēata cyning gūðe rāesum,
frēa-wine folca, Frēslondum on,
Hrēðles eafora, hioro-dryncum swealt,
bille gebēaten. (2354-9)

[That was not the least of hand to hand combats where Hygelac was slain, when the king of the Geats, the noble lord of the people, Hrethel's son, died of sword strokes in the rushes of battle, in Friesland, cut down by the blade.]

There is no suggestion that the hero could have prevented the king's fall, nor is there any mention of the overwhelming defeat of the Geats. The emphasis instead is on the terrible revenge that Beowulf took for his lord as he fell back to the sea, carrying off as trophies the war-gear of thirty Hetware.

. . . lýt eft becwōm
fram þam hild-freca hāmes nīosan. (2365-6)

[Few came back from that warrior to seek their homes.]

This remark loses any suggestion of victory for the Geats when we are told that Beowulf returned alone, earm ān-haga (2368), a wretched survivor. The weakened position of the Geats is also apparent in Hygd's offer of the throne to Beowulf. Now that Hygelac is dead, he appeared to be the only one with the power to defend the kingdom against foreigners:

. . . bearne ne truwode,
 þæt hē wið ælfylcum ēpel-stōlas
 healdan cuðe, (2370-2)

[She did not trust her son that he could
 hold his native throne against foreigners.]

In her approach to the problem of succession, the Geatish queen (unlike Wealtheow) saw the threat of foreigners as a more important consideration than the rights of her son. Beowulf, however, perhaps remembering Hrothulf's treachery, chose instead to uphold young Heardred with "friendly counsel", ēstum mid āre (2378), with "kindness and honour", until he became older. This action not only enhances Beowulf's singular nobility in the minds of the audience, it again indicates the extent to which the continuing survival of the Geats had come to depend on him alone. Yet despite Beowulf's support, Hygd's "worst fears and premonitions"³ of foreign wars are soon borne out. Heardred is cut down in battle after giving sanctuary to the Swedish princes, Eanmund and Eadgils, who had rebelled against their uncle Onela.

Him þæt tō mearce weard;
 hē þær for feorme feorh-wunde hlēat
 sweordes swengum, sunu Hygelāces;
 ond him eft gewāt Ongenðīoes bearn
 hāmes nīosan, syððan Heardrēd læg, (2384-8)

[For [Heardred] that became his life's limit; because of his hospitality there the son of Hygelac got his life's wound from the strokes of a sword. And the son of Ongentheow went back to seek his home after Heardred lay dead.]

This second disastrous turning point for the Geats we assume to be the result of a policy aimed at forestalling the Swedish threat by supporting (as the Geats had tried to do in Denmark) one faction in a suhterge-fæderan conflict. With the death of Hygelac, this policy had become a desperate gamble which, in failing, left the Geats surrounded by enemies. There is no mention of Beowulf's part in this battle and although we are told that he was allowed to hold the throne (2389-90), the poet's comment--þæt wæs gōd cyning (2390) seems to apply as much to Onela--þone sēlestan sǣ-cyninga (2382) the best of sea-kings -- as it does to Beowulf himself. The poet passes over the hero's failure to protect his prince and emphasizes instead the now much more difficult revenge that was taken for Heardred's life.

sē ðæs lēodhryres lēan gemunde
 uferan dōgrum, Eadgilse wearð
 fēasceaftum frēond; folce gestēpte
 ofer sǣ side sunu Ōhteres,
 wigum ond wæpnum; hē gewraec syððan
 cealdum cear-siðum, cyning ealdre binēat. (2391-6)

[In later days he was mindful of repaying the prince's fall, became the friend of the destitute Eadgils; with folk he supported the son of Ohthere over the wide sea, with warriors and weapons. Afterwards he got vengeance in forays fraught with pain and cold: he [Eadgils] took the king's life.]

The bitterness of these marches against Sweden that finally took Onela's life suggests that for the Geats it was a war of attrition--a victory without any sense of triumph--leaving only the continuing rancour of a deadly feud.

The distant vantage point from which the poet views the contours of the past makes the world appear colder and darker. And the way he tells of these events--tersely and objectively--without reference to motive, emotion or reaction, suggests that they came about not so much through the interplay of human forces, as by the allotment of an impersonal fate. We are not told, for example, why Hygelac went into Frisia; we are left to imagine Hygd's reaction to the death of her husband, and we are shown almost nothing of Heardred's character. The human scale of the past is diminished in order to bring into relief in the foreground the stature of Beowulf as a man singled out by history and by his own strength to face the dragon. At the same time the events of the background remain as a grim tableau crowded with defeat and the death of kings. When the poet takes up the narrative where it had been broken off by saying again that the hero had survived every combat, every dangerous battle,

oð ðone ānne dæg,
þe he wið þam wyrme gewegan sceolde. (2399-2400)

[until that one day when he should fight
with the dragon]

those intimations of national catastrophe felt at the beginning

of the second part of the poem and elaborated in the poet's retrospect are now intensified by the imminence of the hero's death.

The old king, "sad in mind", wæfre ond wælfus (2420) restless and ready for death, sits on the headland overlooking the dragon barrow. It is a somber and portentous place--hlāw under hrūsan, holmwylme nēh, / yðgewinne (2411-12) a mound under the earth close to the sea-surge, the struggling waves--a place fraught with the presence of death:

wyrd ungemete nēah,
sē ðone gomelan grētan sceolde (2420-1)

[the fate was very close which should
come to the old man]

Around Beowulf is gathered a small circle of companions, those he has chosen to go with him to face the dragon. His companions now listen to the teachings and recollections of their king as Beowulf himself had once done, when at the feast in Heorot, Hrothgar,

. . . gomela Scilding--
fela fricgende-- feorran rehte;
. . . hwīlum gyd āwræc--sōð ond sārlic,
. . . hwīlum eft ongan, eldo gebunden,
gomel gūð-wiga gioguðe cwiðan,
hilde strengo;. . . (2105-13)

[the old Scylding, who had learned many things, spoke of times far-off. . . at times he told tales, true and sad,. . . at times again the great-hearted king, bound with age, the old warrior, would begin to speak of his youth, his battle strength.]

Beowulf has become like Hrothgar in outward appearance, but he shares none of the helplessness the Danish king had when, hine ylde benam/mægenes wynnum (1866-7), age robbed him of the joys of his might. As Beowulf begins to search out and relate those memories which give meaning to his life, he gathers strength to face the new conflict.

Beowulf's recollections begin years before the period described in the poet's survey of the events which brought Beowulf to the throne. His memories of Geatish history break off at the place in time where the poet began: at Hygelac's defeat on the Rhine. In contrast to the cold detachment of the poet's commentary, Beowulf's speech is heavy with emotion and with the presentiment of death. With the end very near, his mind turns back to his earliest childhood. He remembers with affection that when he was seven years old he was given a princely fostering in Hrethel's court. The fact remarked on earlier by the poet--that the Geats once thought him "slack" (2187) an "unlikely prince" (2188)--appears to have been coloured over in his memory by time and by his later experiences. He recalls instead the warmth of his kinship with Hygelac--and the deep pathos surrounding the unattonable slaying of Herebeald:

Wæs þā m yldestan ungedēfe-līce
 mæges dædum morþor-bed strêd,
 syððān hyne Hæðcyn of horn-bogan,
 his frēa-wine, flāne geswencte,
 miste mercelses ond his mæg ofscēt,
 brōðor oðerne, blōdigan gāre. (2435-40)

[For the eldest, a murder-bed was
 wrongfully spread through the deed
 of a kinsman, when Hæthcyn struck

him down, his friendly lord, with an
 arrow from his horned bow--missed the
 mark and shot his kinsman dead, one
 brother the other with the bloody
 arrowhead.]

The words "ungedēfe-līce" and "morþor-bed" overrule, I think, Klaeber's conclusion that this was an "accidental killing. . . an ordinary incident."⁴ Nor does the very serious tone of Beowulf's comment--fyrenum gesyngad (2441), a deed wrongfully done --with its connotations of "crime" and "sin" seem suited to the description of a hunting accident. Herebeald's death, like the slaying of Abel, has "the primal eldest curse upon't, A brother's murder."

The murder of Herebeald by Hæ ðcyn recalls on one hand the allusions in the first part of the poem to the story of Cain; on the other hand, by echoing (however slightly) the myth of Baldr and Hoð, the murder story carries into the period described by Beowulf the suggestion of an older, more savage and more hopeless dispensation. The poet's audience would remember the Germanic gods (if at all), not as gods but only as the very remote, noble, and quite pagan ancestors of English and Scandinavian kings. But they knew as well that their Christian morality and the heathen code of their ancestors came together and agreed in one particular: that there was a curse on the slaying of kin. At this point of contact between the Christian and heathen traditions, the poet uses memories of both in Beowulf's story to evoke the deepest layers of the past and to suggest

(by a parallel with the recurring Scriptural motif) the curse which was to come on the people of the Geats.

The suggestive connection of Hæthcyn's murder of his brother to the story of Cain rests in the unattonable nature of the killings: neither Hrethel nor Adam could take vengeance against their own guilty sons. Hæthcyn's crime was a deed--
hreðre hygemeðe (2442) "baffling to the heart"--

Sceolde hwæðre swā þeah
 æðeling unwrecen ealdres linnan (2442-3)

[yet it had happened that a prince had
 to lose life unavenged]

Beowulf compares Hrethel's dilemma to that of an old man who sees his son hanged on the gallows.

. . . þonne his sunu hangað
 hrefne tō hroðre ond hē him helpe ne mæg,
 eald ond infrōd, ænige gefremman.
 Symble bið gemyndgād morna gehwylce
 eaforan ellor-sið; (2447-51)

[When his son hangs as a joy to the raven,
 and old in years and wise, he may not help him.
 Always with every morning he is reminded of
 his son's journey elsewhere.]

Hrethel and the father whose son is hanged are both helpless against the law which allows them no course of action as an outlet for their grief. But the answer to the problem that "baffled" Hrethel and eventually broke his heart was surely apparent to the poet's Christian audience who knew God's judgement on Cain:

sipðan Cain wearð
 tō ecg-banan āngan brēper
 fæderen-mæge; hē þā fāg gewāt,
 morpre gemearcod, man-drēam flēon,
 wēsten warode. þanon wōc fela
 geōsceaft-gāsta; wæs þāra Grendel sum, (1261-7)

[after Cain became sword slayer of his only brother, his own father's son, then he went as an outlaw to flee the cheerful life of men, marked for his murder, held to the wasteland. From him sprang many a spirit sent by fate, Grendel was one of them. . .]

Grendel, we remember, is Caines cynne (107). We are told that he wræc-lastas træd (1352), walked the paths of exile, bearing God's anger. In retrospect, Beowulf's venture in Denmark appears as a kind of positive "exile", carried out with God's blessing as a measure of payment for Ecgtheow's manslaughter. But neither Hrothgar nor Hrethel, for all their pagan nobility, can cleanse the "heart" from within: Unferð, the kinslayer, sits at the feet of the Danish king; and Haethcyn remains in his father's court--pēah him lēof ne wæs (2467) though he was not dear to him. The courtly life that Beowulf looks back upon is not an innocent arcadia of happy warriors, it is a complex balance of good and evil, a society emerging from the desperate anarchy of murder and vengeance. Only by the presence of strong royal power are the people kept from tumbling back into the kind of fyren-ðearfe (14), the dire distress that the Danes had suffered before God sent them a king.

Hrethel's death of a broken heart calls to Beowulf's mind the first attacks by the Swedes, the "dread slaughter" near Hreosnaburg which followed this event.

pā wæs synn ond sacu Swēona ond Gēata,
ofer wīd wæter wrōht gemāne
here-nīð hearda, syððan Hrēðel swealt,
oððe him Ongenðeowes eaferan wæran
frome, fyrð-hwate, frēode ne woldon
ofer heafo healdan, ac ymb Hrēosna-beorh
eatolne inwit-scear oft gefremedon. (2472-8)

[Then there was battle and strife of Swedes
and Geats, over the wide water a quarrel
shared hatred between hardy ones, after
Hrethel died. And the sons of Ongentheow
were bold and active in war, wanted to have
no peace over the lakes, but about Hreosna-
burg often made terrible inroads.]

The word "gefrægn" (2480, 2484) used by Beowulf in his account of the war suggests that he did not actually take part in the battles. Perhaps he was too young. But his position at that time as a young man on the sidelines gave him a slightly more objective vantage point than one would expect of the participants. The sons of Ongentheow have clearly taken advantage of their opportunity to attack the Geats, although in Beowulf's memory, the wars follow as a kind of retribution for Herebeald's death. The vengeance taken by Haethcyn for the Swedish attacks was, as he says, a heardan cēape (2482) "a hard bargain" for which the new king paid with his life. Haethcyn also paid (by ironic implication) for the crown his elder brother should have worn. But both sides depend on the strength of their kings. In the morning a victorious counter-attack on Ongentheow at Ravenswood turns back the invasion. The old Swedish king was killed by Eofor, whose hand, we are told, remembered feuds enough. Beowulf's spirit, we notice, lifts as he retraces in memory the vengeance taken for the Swedish attacks; the mood of his speech changes from elegaic to heroic. The suggestion, felt by the audience, that for the Geats this was a spiritual recovery as well is maintained by the fact that the leader of

the victorious army is not mentioned by name. The word "mæg" (2484) meaning "the kinsman" who took vengeance refers back fifty lines to Hygelac mīn (2434). Yet a new order appears with Hygelac's coming, the tide of hostility is turned back, the balance of power among nations is restored.

When Beowulf now begins to speak of his own service to Hygelac--still without mentioning him by name--the assumption indicates the profound effect that Hygelac has had on Beowulf's life, and the hero's complete dedication to his lord.

Ic him þā mādmas, þē hē mē sealde,
geald æt gūðe, swā mē gifeðe wæs, (2490-1)

[I repaid him in war for the treasures
that he gave me, as was granted me to do.]

There is a note of quiet pride and satisfaction when Beowulf recalls the extent to which even Hygelac depended on him--

Næs him ænig þearf,
þæt hē tō Gifðum oððe tō Gār-Denum
oððe in Swio-rīce sēcean þurfe
wyrsan wīg-freca, weorðe gecypan;
symle ic him on fēðan beforan wolde,
ana on orde, (2493-8)

[There was not any need for him, that he
should have to seek among the Gifthas or
the Spear-Danes or in Sweden in order to
buy with treasure a worse warrior. I
would always go before him in the troop,
alone in the van.]

This was the golden age when Hygelac's munificence in the land and the treasures he gave were repaid by the loyalty and courage of his men. It is to these days that Beowulf's mind returns for the strength to face the new conflict. The sword he now

wears he remembers taking from Dæghrefne, the Frankish champion, whom he crushed to death after the Frank had apparently killed Hygelac and seized the brēost-weorðunge (2504), the famous necklace given to Beowulf at Heorot (1192-1214). Although Beowulf is preoccupied with recounting the vengeance taken for the death of his king, the recollection of this ornament--a jewel as unlucky as the Brōsinga mene (1199) or the Andvara naut⁵--serves to remind the audience of the disastrous implications of the battle in which it was lost. But to Beowulf, the memory of Hygelac's last venture only strengthens his resolve to win the dragon hoard for his people. The passage of time has not lessened his courage because--remembering Hygelac--he remains in spirit what he always was. The heroic life which passes before his eyes is also the credo he would wish to teach the swaēse gesiðas (2518), the dear companions, who hear him out. But when he makes his boasting speech nīehstan siðe (2511) for the last time to his companions--

Ic genēðde fela
gūða on geogoðe; gýt ic wylle,
frōd folces weard, fāhðe sēcan,
māerðu fremman,. . . (2511-4)

In my youth I engaged in many wars.
Old guardian of the people, I shall
still seek battle, perform a deed
of fame. . .

his words are an ironic echo of the lines (2397-2400) in which the poet foretold his death.

Despite the memory of victory won by Hygelac at Ravenswood, and Beowulf's sense of personal triumph in the death of

Dæghrefne, a sinister pattern emerges in the hero's recollections of the past. Defeat is followed by victory in Beowulf's memory--but when the cycle of events that he recalls is compared to the order of later events that we were shown in the poet's survey of the past (2347-2400), certain critical elements recur. In the poet's survey we noticed that Hygelac's death and the subsequent weakness of the Geats under Heardred gave the Swedes their chance to make another successful attack. The strength of Beowulf alone, it seems, prevented the Geats from being overrun at that time, and only later could Beowulf take vengeance in hard forays against Onela. The death of a Geatish king, it seems, will be followed by attacks from Sweden, and the Geats' power to retaliate grows steadily weaker. By the pattern of events revealed in these passages, the poet is preparing the audience to accept the later prophecies of Wiglaf and the Messenger that a renewal of strife is to be expected after Beowulf's death. Since Beowulf's recollections antedate the period described in the poet's survey, full recognition of this pattern is kept from the audience until its impact can be most strongly felt; that is, at the moment when the Geats' last great king--defiant of his inevitable death--moves off against the dragon.

As the main action is climaxed in the dragon struggle, the flight of the cowardly troop to the wood (2596-9) and their ignoble return (2845-52) bring into relief the passage

of time. Fellowship deserts Beowulf in the hour of his death, his swāse gesiðas run for their lives. The poet emphasizes in gnomic lines that Beowulf like Everyman must make the journey alone.

Ne wæs þæt ēðe sið,
þæt sē mæra maga Ecgðeowes
grund-wong þone ofgyfan wolde;
sceolde ofer willan wīc eardian
elles hwergen, swā sceal æghwylc mon
ālætan læn-dagas. (2586-91)

[That was not an easy journey (or, course of action) that the illustrious son of Ecgtheow was willing to leave the earth; against his will he must take up a dwelling place elsewhere--as every man must give up fleeting days.]

Only Wiglaf, a prince of the Scylfings, shares the spirit of the troop who fought against Grendel at Heorot. He remembers his kinship to Beowulf, the honours and benefits the old king has given him, and so he draws his sword and enters the fight. It is interesting to notice in this regard that whereas to the late mediaeval author of Everyman (printed 1530) the character "Kindred" is next to follow "Fellowship" in deserting the doomed man, to the Beowulf-poet Kinship is stronger than the fear of death:

Sibb æfre ne mæg
wiht onwenden, þām ðe wēl þenceð. (2599-2600)

[Nothing can ever set aside kinship in him who means well.]

Wiglaf's reaction to Beowulf's need is a dramatic test of the love and loyalty that the king inspires.

þā wæs forma sīð
 geongan cempa, þæt hē gūðe ræs
 mid his frēodryhtne fremman sceolde.
 Ne gemealt him se mōdsefa, nē his mæges laf
 gewāc æt wīge. . . (2625-29)

[That was the first time for the young warrior that he was obliged to enter the war-storm with his lord. His spirit did not melt, nor did his father's heirloom fail in the fight.]

When Wiglaf takes his place at Beowulf's shoulder we are reminded of the hero's own dedication to his lord and kinsman Hygelac. The love that the king inspires, Nū is sē dæg cumen (2646), now the day is come, is a measure of the exceptional example that he has set. The poet uses the symbol of Wiglaf's sword, his mæges lāf (2628), to illustrate by contrast the negative possibilities present in this moment of choice.

Wiglaf's entry into the dragon fight calls to the poet's mind the part his sword played in Onela's war against his rebellious nephews. The sword Wiglaf draws once belonged to Eanmund, wræccan wine-lēasum (2613), the friendless exile, whom Wiglaf's father, Weohstan, slew and whose war-gear he carried off to his lord the Swedish king. Onela gave his nephew's sword back to Weohstan and, as the poet remarks ironically,

nō ymbe ðā fāhðe spræc,
 þeah ðe hē his brōðor bearn ābredwade (2618-19)

[he did not speak of the feud, though
 (Weohstan) had killed his brother's son.]

Onela's silence was a renunciation of kinship like that expected

of Hrothulf against his cousins at Heorot. Wiglaf's decision to help Beowulf is in this way set in contrast against a background of the recurring treachery of suhterge-fæderan conflict.

The poet's account of the provenance of Wiglaf's sword provides further insight into that dark period of Geatish history when Heardred was slain. The presence of Beowulf's kinsman, Weohstan, in the Swedish court now helps to explain perhaps the fact that the hero was allowed to hold the throne (2389-90) although the Geats had been too weak to protect their lord, Heardred. The "cold, sad" marches which led to Onela's death and placed Eanmund's brother, Eadgils, on the Swedish throne (2391-6) must have forced Weohstan's retirement to the Geatish side. It is among the Geats that Weohstan left at his death his countless war-trophies (2624), and there too must have been found the rich dwelling-place of the Wægmundings (2607) given by Beowulf to Wiglaf. But there is an ironic ambivalence in Wiglaf's kinship to both the Scylfings and to Beowulf. Wiglaf is now in the Geatish troop and not (as his father was) in the Swedish army because he is the son of the man who killed the brother of the present king of Sweden. The sword he carries, Eanmundes lāf (2611), would be considered a precious Swedish heirloom. When we recall the way Ingeld's young thane was provoked a generation after his father's death to take vengeance on the Danish fæmnan-þegn (2059), it seems possible (if we look ahead for a moment) that Wiglaf's possession

of the Swedish sword could provide a pretext, just when Beowulf's death provides the opportunity, for another Swedish attack.⁶ And at this moment Wiglaf's single-handed response to Beowulf's need suggests that, ironically, this prince of the Swedes (2603) is the only successor among the Geats to that heroic spirit on which their survival depends.

Wiglaf's caustic speech to the cowards, reminding them of the promises they made in the mead-hall to support Beowulf in his need, echoes Hrothgar's memory of similarly idle boasts (480-3) before the attacks of Grendel. In the fury of the dragon's first rush the faithless Geats run to protect their lives, just as the Danish thanes at Heorot moved elles hwær (138) to avoid Grendel's anger. On the other hand, the dragon's attacks test in Beowulf the kingly qualities of courage, kindness and wisdom. The retreat and return of the Geats provide a dramatic frame which sets in contrast, first, the courage and unbending fortitude of their king.

Stið-mōd gestōd wið stēapne rond
winia bealdor, ðā sē wŷrm gebēah
snūde tōsomne; hē on searwum bād. (2566-8)

[Stout-hearted he stood with his shield
high, the lord of friends, while quickly
the dragon coiled itself; he waited in
his armour.]

In the dragon's second fiery onslaught, with Wiglaf now beside him, we are shown a poignant image of the caritas of the old folk-guardian. Wiglaf's linden shield is burned from his hand,

ac sē maga geonge under his mǣges scyld
 elne geeode, þā his āgen wæs
 glēdum forgrunden. (2675-7)

[but the young man went quickly under his
 kinsman's shield when his own was consumed
 with flames]

As Wiglaf takes shelter behind Beowulf's shield, the king strikes once more at the dragon with such force that Naegling shatters from the blow. The dragon's third attack against the now disarmed king tests the craeft ond cēnðu (2696) the "intelligence and keenness" of the noble kinsmen in the extremity of horror. The dragon seizes Beowulf by the neck but Wiglaf ducks under the serpent's head and stabs it lower down. Beowulf is fatally wounded; yet we are told that,

þā gen sylf cyning
 gewēold his gewitte, wæll-seaxe gebræd,
 biter ond beadu-scearp, þæt hē on byrnan wæg;
 forwrat Wedra helm wrym on middan. (2702-5)

[The king himself then still controlled
 his mind, he drew the battle-knife biting
 and war-sharp that he wore on his mail
 shirt: the protector of the Weder-Geats
 cut the dragon through the middle.]

The death of the dragon, we are told, is the sīðastsige-hwīle (2710)--the last moment of victory for Beowulf in this world. Only by his death could the true measure of his wisdom, compassion, and courage be taken.⁷ Mortally wounded he sits by the wall and contemplates wīs-hycgende (2716)--wise in thought--the countless treasures he believes he has won for his people. With dēað ungemete nēah (2728) he speaks an apologia to Wiglaf that fulfills the destiny foreseen in him long ago by Hrothgar (1845-53).

Ic ðās lēode hēold
 fīftig wintra; næs sē folc-cyning,
 ymbe-sittendra ænig ðāra,
 þē mec gūð-winum grētan dorste,
 egesan ðēon. Ic on earde bād
 mæl-gesceafta, hēold mīn tela,
 ne sōhte searo-nīðas, nē mē swōr fela
 āða on unriht. Ic ðæs ealles mæg,
 feorh-bennum sēoc, gefēan habban,
 forðām mē wītan ne ðearf waldend fīra
 morðor-bealo māga, þonne mīn sceaced
 līf of līce. (2732-43)

[I ruled this people fifty winters. There was no folk-king of those dwelling about who dared approach me with swords, threaten me with fears. In my land I awaited what fate brought me, held my own well, sought no treacherous quarrels, nor did I swear many oaths unjustly. Sick of life wounds I may have joy of all this, for the Ruler of Men need not blame me for the slaughter of kinsmen when life goes from my body.]

With the king's death the guerdon passes to Wiglaf, the last of the Waegmundings. He is Beowulf's heir more by a coalescence of spirit than of Geatish blood. "A doomed king has died to save a doomed people;"⁸ and, at this moment, to point the irony of his sacrifice the unworthy cowards return from the woods.

It is the essence of this drama that the apotheosis of the ideal king on his last venture should be so contradicted by the common mortality of the men for whom he died. At the time of his first venture against the Grendel kin Beowulf and his men were "an equal temper of heroic hearts". Consider, for example, the description of the Geats' return to Heorot from the haunted mere:

opðæt semninga tō sele cōmon
 frome, fyrð-hwate fēower-tȳne
 Gēata gongan; gum-dryhten mid
 mōdig on gemonge meodo-wongas træd. (1640-3)

[then straightway they came striding
 to the hall, fourteen bold warriors
 of the Geats; their lord, high-spirited,
 walked in their company over the fields
 to the mead-hall]

But the same experience of later conflict that strengthened the spirit of the king has brought about a radical change in the heart of the Geatish troop. The separation in spirit that has taken place during this time, between the king and his comrades, is now, after Beowulf's last venture, conveyed by the contrapuntal lines which describe the troops' return from the woods.

Næsðā lang tō ðon,
 þæt ðā hild-latan holt ofgēfan,
 tȳdre trēow-logan, tȳne ætsomne,
 ðā ne dorston ær dareðum lācan
 on hyra man-dryhtnes miclan þearfe; (2845-9)

[Then it was not long before the battle-slack ones left the woods, ten weak troth-breakers together, who had not dared fight with their spears in their liege lord's great need.]

In the trial against the dragon, the Geatish troop has failed the test of loyalty, the most important hallmark of the thane.

Wiglaf speaks to the cowards in a way that reveals the extent to which the comitatus, the bond of mutual support between the king and his men, has broken down.

þæt lā mæg secgan, sē ðe wyle sōð specan,
 þæt sē mon-dryhten, sē ēow ðā māðmas geaf,
 ēored-geatwe, þe gē þær on standað,

þæt hē gēnunga gūð-gewædu
 wrāðe forwurpe, ðā hyne wīg beget.
 Nealles folc-cyning fyrð-gesteallum
 gylpan þorfte; (2864-74)

[Yes, he who wished to tell the truth
 could say that the liege lord who gave
 you treasure, the war-gear that you
 stand in there. . . that he completely
 and grievously threw away the armour
 when war came upon him. The folk-king
 had no need to boast of his war-comrades.]

The downfall of the Geats, foreseen by Wiglaf, does not depend solely on the death of their last great king. (Nor is it simply the predestined will of God: sōð is gecyþed, / þæt mihtig god manna cynnes / weold wide-ferhð (700-2) 'the truth is known that mighty God has always ruled mankind'. But Beowulf, we remember, had to get on his feet before God granted him victory over Grendel's mother (1550-6).⁹) The defeat that Wiglaf foresees in images of exile and desolation will follow not only when the enemies of the Geats learn the news of Beowulf's death, but when they hear the story of Geatish cowardice. Wiglaf makes it clear to the cowards that by their failure to protect the king they have lost an irrevocable chance to prove themselves.

Wergendra tō lýt
 þrong ymb þēoden, þā hyne sīo þrāg becwōm.
 Nū sceal sinc-þego ond swyrd-gifu
 eall ēðel-wyn ēowrum cynne
 lufen ālicgean; lond-rihtes mōt
 þære mæg-burge monna æghwylc
 īdel hweorfan, syððan æðelingas
 feorran gefricgean flēam ēowerne,
 dōm-lēasan dæd, (2882-90)

[Too few defenders thronged about the prince
 when his time came. Now the receiving of
 treasure shall cease for your race, and the

giving of swords, all comfort, the enjoyment
of pleasant homes. Each man of your kindred
must go, deprived of his land-right when
nobles from afar learn of your flight, your
inglorious deed.]

By showing themselves unworthy of their king, the Geats have brought about their own impending disaster.

At the end of his speech Wiglaf sends a messenger to announce the death of the king and the destruction of the dragon to the Geatish earls waiting in the city. In his choric address to the earls in the entrenchment, the messenger amplifies the intimations of doom foreseen by Wiglaf in his speech to the cowards. Wiglaf dealt with present causes, but the prophecies of the messenger are derived from the same background of historical events that Beowulf recalled as the heroic days of his youth. The messenger speaks of these events with the prudent voice of the people and the poet remarks that hē sōðlice sægde ofer ealle (2899), he spoke to them all truthfully.

The messenger expects a renewal of strife when the Franks and Frisians hear of the king's fall. It is now apparent that only the strength of Beowulf's reputation has protected the Geats from their enemies' reprisals for the conflict that Hygelac began.

Wæs sīo wrōht scepen
heard wīð Hūgas, syððan Higelāc cwōm
faran flotherge on Frēsna land,
. . . . Ūs waes ā syððan
Merewīoingas milts ungyfeðe.-- (2914-21)

[That fierce quarrel with the Hugas (i.e. Franks) was started when Hygelac sailed with an armed fleet to the land of the Frisians. . . Ever since then the good will of the Merovingian has been denied us.]

After accounting for the origins of the Frankish conflict, the messenger retraces the beginnings of the first Swedish war.

Nē ic te Swēo-ðēode sibbe oððe trēowe
 wihte ne wēne, ac wæs wīde cūð,
 þaette Ongenðlō ealdre besnyðede
 Hæðcen Hrēþling wið Hrefna-wudu,
 þā for onmēdlan ærest gesōhton
 Gēata lēode Gūð-Scilfingas. (2922-7)

[Nor do I expect any peace or trust from the Swedish people, for it is wide-known that Ongentheow took the life of Haethcyn, Hrethel's son, near Ravenswood when in their arrogance the people of the Geats first went against the War-Scylfings.]

The messenger's suggestion that the Geats began the war for onmēdlan (2926) "out of arrogance" tends to cast blame on Haethcyn for the Swedes' continuing hostility. He completely disregards "the dread slaughter near Hrēosnabeorh" (2475-8) which Beowulf recalled as the origin of the war, and which, according to him, Haethcyn was trying to avenge (2479-83) when he was killed at Ravenswood. The messenger disregards as well the more recent Swedish war, the slaying of Heardred, and the vengeance that Beowulf took against Onela. Instead the period described by him is centred on two contrasting moments within the scope of Hygelac's career--his "first achievement and final death."¹⁰ But the messenger's account reverses the order of time: the allusion to Hygelac's defeat on the Rhine is followed

by a detailed commentary on the battle against Ongentheow which brought Hygelac to the throne. The reference to the earlier Swedish wars serves to turn our attention back towards Sweden, the direction of most imminent danger now that Beowulf is dead. In this way the threatening significance of the messenger's historical vista is kept in direct relation to the death of the Geats' last great king. At the same time an implied comparison is developed between Beowulf's careful defense of the realm and Hygelac's violent and spectacular aggression against his enemies.

The battle against Ongentheow is described much more realistically and in greater detail by the messenger than it was by Beowulf. And in contrast to Beowulf's proud memories, the details in this account are chosen to give emphasis and immediacy to the horrors of war. The messenger tells of the way Haethcyn's ruthless capture of Ongentheow's wife--iō-meowlan golde berofene (2931) "the old woman bereft of her gold --results in his own death and the painful retreat of the leaderless Geats to Ravenswood. There the sweorda lāfe (2936) "the survivors" are besieged through the night by the "old and terrible" king of Sweden:

cwæð hē on mergenne mēces ecgum
gētan wolde, sume on galg-trēowum
fuglum tō gamene. (2929-41)

[he said that in the morning he would
cut them apart with sword blades, (hang)
some on gallows-trees as sport for birds.]

But like the trumpet that calls to awaken the dead, this dark moment is broken by the sound of Hygelac's horn in the morning. When the messenger turns to describe the pursuit and death of Ongentheow, he emphasizes as much the heroic resistance of the old king as he does the vengeful onslaught of Eofor, who believes that his brother, Wulf, has fallen. And the epithet se gōða "the good man" impartially applied to both Hygelac (2944) and Ongentheow (2949) seems characteristic of the messenger's attempt to balance the scale of history. Just as the previous surveys of the past were broken off at a point in time where the Geats are triumphant, so the messenger concludes by recounting the princely rewards that Hygelac gave to Wulf and Eofor (2994-8).

But there is to be still another reversal of fortune. The messenger now foresees an outbreak of the old feuds when the Swedes learn of Beowulf's death.

þæt ys sīo fāhōð ond se fēondscipe,
wæl-nīð wera, ðæs ðe ic wēn hafo,
þē ūs sēceað tō swēona lēoda,
syððan hīe gefricgeað frēan ūserne
ealdor-lēasne, þone ðe ær gehēold
wið hettendum hord ond rīce, (2999-3004)

[That is the feud and the hostility,
the murderous hatred of men, of which
I have expectation when the people of
the Swedes set upon us after they hear
that our prince is dead, who before
guarded wealth and kingdom against
enemies.]

And in elegaic images recalling the lament of the last survivor he sketches the impending defeat of the people. Now the fair

maid "reft of gold shall walk in a strange land" and "the spear shall be grasped by hands on many a cold morning."

. . . nalles hearpan swēg
wīgend weccēan, ac sē wonna hrefn. . . (3023-4)

[. . . no song of the harp
shall waken the warriors, but the dark
raven. . .]

The messenger speaks with the intuitive sense of the people and the poet assures us that hē ne lēag fela/wyrda nē worda (3029-30), he did not lie much in his words or his prophecies.

A second account of the hoard follows the grim foreboding of the messenger. Some thousand winters past (3050) it was first buried by noble princes who put a curse on it (3052) which seems to have destroyed the race mourned by the watchman:

þā wæs gesyne, þæt se sīð ne ðāh
þām ðe unrihte inne gehyðde
wræce under wealle; weard ær ofslōh
fēara sumne; þā sīo fāhð gewearð
gewrecen wrāðlice. (3058-62)

[Then it was seen that the act did not profit him who wrongly kept hidden the handiworks under the wall. The keeper had first slain one of a few, then the feud had been fiercely avenged.]

The dragon held sway for three hundred years until the treasure was disturbed by the fleeing slave (2223-4). Finally, Beowulf, in his life's sacrifice, appears as the one whom sigora soðcýning . . . gemet ðuhte (3055-7), the True King of Victories thought fit to open the hoard. The poet's disclosure that the gold was wound in a mysterious spell adds to the sense of awe that is felt as we contemplate the wundor deaðe (3037) of the king.

Now the treasures, grimme gecēapod (3012), grimly purchased, are to be given to the fire alongside the hero's body as the Danes who had once been leaderless paid tribute to Scyld at his death with their people's-treasure. Beowulf, as Wiglaf says, hēold on hēah-gesceap (3084), "held to his high destiny". The juxtaposition of this second account of the hoard with the images of desolation foreseen by the messenger, and the structural placement of these passages linked in matter and theme to the survivor's lament, serve as a recessionary movement away from the glory of the hero's death to the destruction of his people.

The whole nation now faces the plight of the leaderless warriors at Ravenswood: but there will be no sound of the horn in the morning. The fate of the Geats is expressed in the song sorg-cearig (3152) the dirge for the hero. An old woman with bound tresses is heard, sorely dreading "the onset of evil days, a warrior's terror, his humiliation and captivity". And yet, though the Geats drift away like the smoke from the pyre, in the poet's song of Beowulf, the timeless values of their hero remain as bright as bēacen godes.

At the end of the poem we look, as Tolkien has said, "as if from a visionary height upon the house of man in the valley of the world."¹¹ From this vantage point we look back to the last day of Beowulf's life and all the crowded events of his long career, past the origins of ancient wars and the

frumsceafte (45), the beginning of noble families, and on into the darkness beyond. Now, nothing beside remains.

Hryre wong gecrong
 gebrocen tō beorgum p̄ær iū beorn monig
 glædmōd ond goldbeorht. . .
 seah on sinc, on sylfor, on seorogimmas. . .
 on p̄ās beorhtan burg brādan rīces¹²

The Ruin (31-37)

[The place is sunk into ruin, levelled to the hills where formerly many a man glad of heart and bright with gold. . .gazed on treasure, on silver, on precious jewels (and), . . . on this bright city of the broad kingdom.]

The Beowulf-poet, like the poet of these lines from The Ruin, has searched the wasted wreckage of a vanished race for answers to the mystery of human existence. In general terms, of course, he and his audience must have known that the Geats, like the Burgundians, the Visigoths, and many another people renowned in story and song had disappeared in the stream of time. Few scholars would now disagree with Dr. Stjerna's archaeological conclusions which bear out so well what we are told by the messenger in Beowulf:

" . . . as regards the eastern part of the South Scandinavian region. . . development of the old types of objects ceases not later than about the middle of the sixth century. . . and those types are superceded by others which had developed north of our imaginary boundary line, (ie. a line drawn between Lake Wener and Lake Maleren.)

All this shows that during the earlier part of the sixth century the old traditions of South Scandinavia were violently and completely broken with, and that it was the peoples of Northern Scandinavia who affected the change."¹³

By the time St. Angarius, the first of the Christian missionaries reached Sweden in 818 A.D., the kings at Uppsala had control over the entire peninsula north of Skane. The extent of the Swedish dominions is confirmed by Wulfstan's report to King Alfred:

" þonne æfter Burgenda lande wæron
 ūs þās land, þā synd hātene ærest
 Blēcingægond Mēore ond Eowland ond
 Gotland, on bæcbord; ond þās land hýrað
 tō Sweōn." 14

[After the land of the Burgundians,
 (ie. Bornholm), then next to us on the
 larboard were the lands called Blekinge
 and Møre, (ie. the southern provinces)
 and Öland and Gotland and these lands
 belong to the Swedes.]

Apart from knowing that the Geats were in fact overrun and destroyed by their Northern enemies, the poet's audience would need to know almost nothing of their history in order to appreciate the tragedy that their destruction inspired. That does not mean that the six passages that we have examined in the second part of the poem do not contribute greatly to the effect of the drama, simply that the contribution of these passages does not depend on their accuracy as history. In fact, in the historical vistas of part two, past, present and future are made to impinge upon each other in such a way that we lose our normal sense of continuity and begin to feel that all time is eternally present and vibrant in every moment of the drama. To discuss the implications of this complex time structure is, as Irving suggests, "to discuss the meaning of Part II and, to some extent, of the entire poem."¹⁵

The time perspective is structured very differently in the two parts of the poem. In part one time moves forward evenly in "the clear bright present of youth"¹⁶ as the poet reveals scene by scene the adventures of the Geats in Denmark. The immediacy of this present time is brought into relief by the two "searchlight" references to Ecgtheow and to Hygelac which probe the past and future of the Geatish people. Such references as there are to the Danish past in the stories of Scyld, Sigemund, Heremod and Hengest, appear in the innocent guise of a poet's song, or a moral tale told by the king. These stories are not allowed to intrude upon the present joy of the Danish feast, they are fixed in their place in time and are no more disturbing than scenes from the golden tapestries that decorate the walls of Heorot. Those intimations that we have of future catastrophe in the allusions to the war against Ingeld, the burning of Heorot, and the ensuing treachery between Hrothulf and Hrothgar are felt (if at all) as a fearful possibility beyond or outside the present frame of things. These elements of the Danish drama do not have the weight of imminent disaster that gathers around references to the Geatish past in the second part of the poem.

Part two of the poem begins with such a flight through time that distant future events are thrown into the background of the past. With the opening sentence a line of Geatish kings is swept away and we are told that Beowulf, the last of these, is about to die; in fact, is already doomed by the awakening of

a dragon. In this flight through time the Geatish triumph in Denmark recedes far into the past and now instead of looking forward with the optimism of youth, we turn back with Death beside us to examine in a series of retrospective views the passage of time that has brought Beowulf and the Geats to the dragon's barrow. From this point of view we are able to consider the events on Beowulf's last day as the central point in the web of time and circumstances that bind together his fate and that of his people. Out from this central point vistas into the past and future are opened one by one in speeches by the poet and the characters before and after the moment of the hero's death. The relation of each of these vistas to the central moment is like that of a view from the archways of the house of man overlooking the valley of the world. Each "observer" at the archways (the last survivor, the poet, Beowulf, Wiglaf, the messenger) adds in his speech to our growing impression of encircling doom. Together their views into the past and future form a montage crowded with scenes of violent revenge, helpless anguish and senseless war, a contrasting ground to the lonely nobility of the hero's death. This is the design that Klæber referred to as the poet's "rambling, dilatory method--the forward, backward and sideward movements . . . the circuitous route by which the events leading up to [the dragon fight] are brought before the reader."¹⁷ But the design is a simple and effective way of expressing the poet's major themes. In the six passages that we have examined in

part two we are made to realize finally that for the Geats (and for those who lose faith) there is only the prospect of a slaughter field covered with their corpses.

The Trojan drama in the Iliad ends in much the same way as the drama of the Geats and with the expression of many of the same ideas. Perhaps the most important likeness is our knowledge that the dirges sung for Hector at the end of the poem are also the requiem for his nation. Hector, as was often the case with Beowulf, had been caught in a war that he had no part in starting and that by nature he would have tried to avoid. He had learned to fight out of a sense of duty and respect for timè and aidos, for honour and fame; but he knew that the war was hopeless and unjust, and that many of the Trojans he defended were unworthy of him. When Priam brought his corpse through the gates of Troy, mourning women reveal in speeches like those at the end of Beowulf to what extent their city depended on this one man. Kassandra's words to the Trojans

Come men of Troy and Trojan women: look
upon Hektor if ever before you were joy-
ful when you saw him come back living
from battle; for he was a great joy to
his city and all his people.¹⁸

Iliad (24.704-6)

Richmond Lattimore's translation

are like the words of the messenger to the Geats urging them to go and gaze on the corpse of their king:

Nū is ofost betost
þæt wē þēod cyning þær scēawian
ond þone gebringan, þē ūs beagas geaf
on ād-fære

(3007-10)

And, as in the Messenger's speech, Andromache, weeping over her husband's corpse, foresees the destruction of the city, and a life of slavery for herself and her child.

. . . head to heel this city
will be sacked, for you its defender are
gone, you who guarded the city, and the
grave wives, and the innocent children, wives
who before long must go away in the hollow
ships and among them I shall also go. . . (24.725-32)

Helen, the last of these women to speak, remembers Hector's "gentleness of heart and. . . gentle words." Then the Trojans begin to gather wood for his funeral pyre and hurry to complete the mound "for fear the strong-greaved Achaians might too soon set upon them."¹⁹ The scenes in both poems are similar in many details, but their likeness is out-weighted by a difference which reveals an important aspect of the way the Beowulf-poet looks at man in the world.

It is impossible for the Homeric style to achieve the range of emotional effects and the multiplicity of meanings that are brought together in the scene of Beowulf's death. This is because, as Auerbach has shown, Homer "knows no background. What he narrates is for the time being the only present and fills both the stage and the reader's mind completely."²⁰ There is therefore nothing in Homer to compare with the sense of encircling doom that is felt at the end of Beowulf. The destruction of Troy, like the burning of Heorot, is not part of the visible present and so remains outside the poetic realm. (It was a poet²¹ much later than Homer who imagined Cassandra

with fire dancing before her mind's eye, seeing in a trance the burning roofs and towers of the city). The perspective developed in the vistas of part two of Beowulf allows the poet to concentrate "an antiquity of sorrow"²² and generations of gathering catastrophe upon the single moment of Beowulf's death. The entire history of Geatish nation is brought to the test when their last king passes on ðæs waldendes wære (3109).

The perspective in Beowulf also creates the effect that the hero has passed through a life that has tested every concept and every principle that he finally stands for. Men of his stature are not made overnight. The historical passages that we have examined allow the poet to dramatize those long accumulations of experience which make one man a hero and others cowards. Homer's characters, on the other hand, have destinies that are "clearly defined, they wake every morning as if it were the first day of their lives. . . . Odysseus on his return is exactly the same as he was when he left Ithaca two decades earlier."²³ Beowulf's own recollections and those of the poet reveal that he has been a part of all that he has met and known and done. And as Wiglaf says (2820), he does all things well. His legacy to the Geats is not so much the dragon's treasure, as the imperishable model of his life of courage and sacrifice for his kinsmen and people. The treasure is only a symbol of the legacy of service

that he passes on to Wiglaf.

Nu ic on māðma mine bebohte
frōde feorh-lege, fremmað gēna
lēoda þearfe! Ne mæg ic her leng wesan (2799-2801)

[Now that I have bought the hoard of
treasures with my old life, still attend
to the needs of the people. I cannot
be here longer.]

The Beowulf-poet presents us with the idea of the hero as a man who remains unchanged in the flux of human conflict and who all his life uses the strength that God gave him for the sake of others. Beowulf goes to seek soð-fæstra dōm (2821), but the Geats themselves pass judgment on their king:

cwædon, þæt hē wære wyruld-cyninga
mannum mildust ond mon ðwærust
lēodum lēðost ond lof-geornost (3180-82)

[They said that he was of the world-kings
the most merciful of men and the gentlest,
the kindest to his people and the most
eager for fame.]

The Geats' memorial for Beowulf is not a grave mound or a house of dust, it is a beacon to guide other voyagers over the dark seas of life.²⁴

CONCLUSION

"Beowulf is a little different. . . No
one in Homer had fought against the
darkness."

C.S. Lewis, Preface to Paradise Lost

The purpose of this thesis has been to examine the way the drama of the Geats in Beowulf serves to illuminate and complement the main subject of the poem, the first and last achievements of a great king. My study of the sixteen passages in the poem which present this drama has shown, I believe, that each passage is an integral part of the poet's carefully wrought design. There is perhaps nothing in heroic poetry to match the richness and depth of this design nor the artistry of the poet in using the dramatic power of the Geatish downfall to strengthen the tragic effect felt by the audience at the end of the hero's life. It would now seem that Klaeber's criticism that "the progress of the narrative is frequently impeded. . . (by) digressions and episodes. . . (that) interrupt the story"² is unjust as it applies to the drama of the Geats because it ignores the function of these passages in creating the perspective by which we come to understand the purpose of Beowulf's life and the significance of his death. At the end of the poem, as the Geats follow their king into the darkness he had fought so long against, the poet's song becomes an urgent warning fraught with meaning for all time. I would like to conclude this paper by making one or

two general observations about the poet's vision of man and the world, observations that are derived from this study of the drama of the Geats.

It is in time structure that the drama of the Geats in Beowulf differs most from the backgrounds of events that serve to complement the stories of Odysseus and Achilles. "Homer lives more intensely in the present than any other great poet."³ When Homer treats the past or the future he does so allusively or in digressive speeches, and then only to divert our attention away from a scene already over-burdened with emotion. At the Æcchean assembly in book one of the Iliad⁴ when Achilles recalls his own part in the history of the war - the towns sacked and the prizes taken - the audience learns much of the Trojan drama; but Homer's purpose is to offer an outlet for the intolerable anger and humiliation that Achilles suffers at this moment from the insults of Agamemnon. Likewise, Hector, parting from Andromache, has a vision of his wife being dragged to the ships after the fall of Troy and he wishes himself in his grave rather than hear her cries.⁵ It is a moment of bitter foreboding but, however terrible, it serves to divert our attention from the present anguish brought on by our knowledge of the almost imminent death of the Trojan hero. In part one of Beowulf, as we have seen, time moves forward evenly as it does in Homer and reflects the youthful outlook of Beowulf and his companions. In part

two however, the poet takes the point of view of one who no longer sees events as through a glass darkly and, while the dragon fight unfolds, he reveals the interconnection of past, present and future, and the weight of doom which encompasses the moment of Beowulf's death. In Homer, nothing appears "out of the darkness of an unilluminated past"⁶; there is no sense of the "multilayeredness"⁷ lying behind the image of the visible present. This difference between Beowulf and Homer reflects a different way of looking at man in the world.

The sense of time in the drama of the Geats, the sense that all time is eternally present and 'vibrant' in every moment suggests that Beowulf was written at least in part to set men free from the bonds of Fate and to show that what each man does (or fails to do) 'counts' in a Christian sense and will, in time, affect not only himself but others around him.⁸ In Homer, this is not the case at all. An illustration is the scene in the second book of the Odyssey⁹ in which Telemachus appeals to the assembled Ithacans to restore public decency, and to help him expel the Suitors from his father's house. The scenes in the Ithacan assembly (there is another at the end of the poem) are remarkably similar in tone and dramatic function to the scenes of Wiglaf's speeches to the cowards before and after the dragon fight. Wiglaf appeals to the cowards to give Beowulf the support he deserves.

Ic wāt geare
 þæt nāron eald-gewyrht þæthē āna scyle
 Gēata duguðe gnorn þrowian
 gesīgan æt sæcce;

(2656-59)

[I know well that it were no recompense for past deeds that he alone of the company of Geats should suffer pain, fall in the fight.]

The Ithacans (as Mentor points out) owe Odysseus a similar debt of service:

"My fellow-citizens, the conclusion that I for one have come to is that kindness, generosity and justice should no longer be the aim of any man who wields the royal sceptre - in fact he might just as well devote his days to tyranny and lawless deeds, if one may judge by the case of Odysseus, that admirable king, to whom not one of the people whom he once ruled like a loving father gives a thought today."¹⁰

Odyssey, II, E.V. Rieu's Translation

After Odysseus returns and slays the Suitors, the dramatic frame is completed" when the Ithacans are again called to the assembly to hear Eupheithes (whose son has been slain) appeal to them for vengeance against the Wanderer. The Ithacans (for the most part) give him no more support than they gave Telemachus; but their failure to act makes no difference to the outcome of Homer's story. Zeus, after hearing the appeal of Athene, decrees the reconciliation of Odysseus with the Suitors' kinfolk and decrees further that Odysseus' rule in Ithaca shall be perpetual. Civil and domestic order are restored by

an Olympian fiat; the Ithacans neither suffer the consequences of their disloyalty nor have they apparently learned anything. The matter is simply out of their hands.

In Beowulf the outcome of events is always in the hands of men. The audience are constantly reminded by exempla from the past of the importance of making the right choice. Moral freedom, and the need to pæt sēltre gecēos (1759), (to) choose the better (part), is the common burden of Beowulf and each of the Geatish thanes.¹² In the first part of the poem the Geats moved in a community of will and purpose, samod aetgedere, towards a common goal. At the end of the poem the failure of the Geatish troop to support their king will result in the scattering of their people as exiles in foreign lands. When Wiglaf speaks to the cowards when they come from the woods he indicates that their failure affects not only themselves,¹³ it will destroy the whole nation:

Nū sceal sinc-þego ond swyrd-gifu
eall æðel-wyn ēowrum cynne
lufen ālicgean; lond-rihtes mōt
þære mæg-burge monna æghwylic
īdel hweorfan, syððan æðelingas
feorran gefricgean flēam ēowerne
dōm-lēasan dæd (2884-2890)

[Now the receiving of treasure shall cease for
your race, and the giving of swords, all comfort,
the enjoyment of pleasant homes. Each man of
your kindred must go, deprived of his land-
right when nobles from afar learn of your flight,
your inglorious deed.]

The social order in Beowulf flourishes or dies because of the free choices that men make. In the drama of the Geats,

civilization withstands the mighty challenges of Grendel and the dragon, only to be destroyed by the weakness of ordinary men. All the splendour of the heroic tradition in which Beowulf and Wiglaf act, and all the strength and nobility of their character are wasted by the cowardice of the Geatish thanes.

The doom the Geats bring on themselves is the result of an accumulation of choices that has separated them from the spirit of their king. After a while men begin to doubt the old ideals, they lose faith in the patterns of life that are set for them by heroes they will never equal. And so in the inevitable hour on hyra man-dryhtnes miclan þearfe (2849), they lose everything by trying to save themselves. When the order is broken and mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, the harmony and joy of men in the hall give way to the terror of conquest, to despair and alienation in the darkness of the empty wasteland. In this aspect the drama of the Geats in Beowulf is closer to the truth of our experience than any other heroic poem.

FOOTNOTES

INTRODUCTION

¹Jan de Vries, Heroic Song and Heroic Legend, trans., B.J. Timmer, (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 13.

²J.R.R. Tolkien, "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics," in Lewis E. Nicholson, ed., An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism (Toronto: Baxter Publishing, 1965), p. 66.

³Quotations and line references from Beowulf are taken from Fr. Klaeber, ed., Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg, 3rd edition, (Boston: D.C. Heath and Co., 1950). The translations which appear in my paper are based on the Notes and the Glossary of Klaeber's 3rd edition and on the translation of this text by E. Talbot Donaldson, Beowulf: A New Prose Translation (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1966). I have also consulted and occasionally used (without further acknowledgement), J.R. Clark Hall and H.D. Meritt, A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary (Cambridge, at the University Press, 1962), R.K. Gordon's translation of Beowulf in his Anglo-Saxon Poetry (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1962), and passages translated by E.B. Irving Jr. in his A Reading of Beowulf (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1969). In the Preface to his English version of Cura Pastoralis King Alfred says that the method he used was to translate "hwilom word be worde, hwilom

ondgit of andgite." In much the same way I have attempted to provide readings which I understand to be widely accepted and which seem to me to offer the most clarity and sense. Any errors which remain as a result of this method I must accept as my own.

⁴Tolkien, p. 88.

⁵Although there is no two-part division indicated in the MS. Cotton Vitellius A. XV., the practice followed here and in Klaeber's text, 'Introduction, V. Structure of the Poem,' li-lviii, of referring to lines 2200-3182 as 'the second part' of the poem reflects the fact that the central action, the dragon fight, contained in these lines is represented by the poet as occurring over fifty years after the youthful adventures of Beowulf in Denmark. By using the terms 'first part' and 'second part' in my discussion of the poem I do not wish to suggest that I share Klaeber's view of the poem's structure, that "Beowulf consists of two distinct parts joined in a very loose manner and held together only by the person of the hero," ('Structure of the Poem', li). The essential unity of the poem has been ably defended by Tolkien op. cit. p. 81. "The general structure of the poem. . . is essentially a balance, an opposition of ends and beginnings. In its simplest terms it is a contrasted description of two moments in a great life, rising and setting; an elaboration

of the ancient and intensely moving contrast between youth and age, first achievement and final death. It is divided in consequence into two opposed portions, different in matter, manner, and length: A from 1 to 2199 (including an exordium of 52 lines); B from 2200 to 3182 (the end). There is no reason to cavil at this proportion; in any case, for the purpose and the production of the required effect, it proves in practice to be right."

⁶Richmond Lattimore, trans. The Iliad of Homer, introduction, (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1967), p. 17.

⁷Bede, A History of the English Church and People, V. 9, trans., Leo Sherley-Price, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1955), p. 277.

⁸Tolkien, p. 71.

⁹Klaeber, p. liv.

¹⁰Ibid., p. liv.

PART I

¹"Riddle 6", in W.F. Bolton, ed., An Old English Anthology, (London: Edward Arnold Ltd., 1963), p. 7.

²"The Runic Poem", in W.F. Bolton, op. cit., p. 15.

³E.B. Irving, A Reading of Beowulf, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), p. 61.

⁴cf. Irving, p. 61.

⁵The phrase wergara cyn is an emendation of the MS reading gara cyn which I propose rather than Klaeber's emendation to Wedera cyn. Klaeber notes in the Second Supplement to his edition (op. cit., p. 466), "none of the three emendations, Wedera, Wulgara (Malone), wigana (Holthausen) is entirely satisfactory." Kemp Malone's emendation is based on an effort to identify the Wilfingas of Beowulf with the Vulgares mentioned by Paulus Deaconus as the enemies of the Longobards. ("Agelmund and Lamicho" in S. Einarsson and N.E. Eliason, eds., Studies in Heroic Legend and Current Speech, Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1959, pp. 92-3, and "Ecgtheow" in Studies pp. 110-115)." In brief, Vulgares is best explained as a latinized form of Longobardish Wulg(w)aras, made up of a base Wulg--"she-wolf" and a familiar Gmc plural suffix (answering to OE-waras and Icelandic--verjar) found in tribal

names and equivalent to --ingas in meaning and function." (K. Malone ed. Widsith, "Glossary of Proper Names," p. 213). This identification in turn is one of the two reasons for the South Baltic location that Malone assigns to the Wulfingas (Widsith ed. p. 214). But it is surely unusual that a tribal name with a latinized Longobardish feminine base stem would appear in this context in Beowulf. Malone is favourable to the idea that Ecgtheow is "a Wylfing by birth and upbringing" ("Ecgtheow," in Studies, p. 114). It seems to me then most unlikely that Hrothgar in a welcoming speech to Beowulf would refer to his father's family with a word equivalent in meaning to 'the sons of wolf-bitches'. Malone is correct (I believe) in showing that the gara cyn of the manuscript refers to the Wulfingas; but a much simpler emendation is perhaps possible. If the missing alliterative syllable was taken to be OE werg-- 'wolf' (cf. ON vargr-- 'wolf') plus the plural suffix 'waras', to denote a tribe of men (or inhabitants!), the resulting compound 'werg(w)aras' would mean "wolf-men". The medial (w) is lost (as in Malone's example) through "dissimilation". Perhaps as OE "werg" developed the secondary meanings 'outlaw, thief, wretch' etc. the proposed compound *wergara no longer made sense to the scribe in the context of Hrothgar's speech with the result that part of the word was lost. In Old Icelandic, 'vargr' forms poetic compounds in the sense of 'warrior', e.g.; varg-fæðandi, varg-nistir, varg-teiter, varg-hollr; that is,

as a "feeder" or a "cheerer" of wolves, but a word meaning 'wolf-man' (if one existed in ON) would probably have the sense of "berserker".

The controversy over line 461 has been taken up by John Byers Jr. "A Possible Emendation of Beowulf 461b", Philological Quarterly, XLVI, (1967), 125-128, whose emendation to "wine-gara cyn, the people of the friendly spears", has the merit that it preserves the clearly written gara cyn of the MS, but his alliterative addition 'wine' is too general to be clear in reference (Byers suggests the Geats), and too complimentary in this context where it must identify the tribe who might not harbour Ecgtheow. Further objections to Byers have been offered by Joseph F. Tuso in "Beowulf 461B and Thorpe's Wara", Modern Language Quarterly, 29, (1968), 259-62, where he points out that wine-gara cyn "results in a half line which [Byers] admits is lengthy and of unusual meter (p. 128), and is itself the result of a compound that is not used elsewhere in Beowulf to refer to the Geats. . . Further, Byers' belief that his wine-gāra cyn refers to the Geats is simply not supported by the text." (p. 260). Tuso agrees with what he calls Malone's "excellent arguments for Ecgtheow's [Wylfing] origin" and adds that "it seems very probably that Hrethel the Geat gave his daughter to Ecgtheow to cement friendship between the Geats and the Wylfings" (p. 261). Tuso's own solution to the problem of 461 is to suggest a return to Thorpe's wara cyn

which Tuso translates as "the guardian folk" or, as another possibility, "the shore people" or "the folk of the sands" which, he says, "might well refer to the Wylfings, who most probably lived on the sandy Pomeranian coast of the southern Baltic" (p. 261). However, to support an emendation (even in part) on the basis of Malone's south Baltic location for the Wylfing tribe is to ignore (as Malone does) the words of the most famous Wylfing hero, Helgi Hundingsbani, who says at one point, eigum heima i Hléseyju, our homestead is on Læsö, (Volsungakviða en forna, in Finnur Jónsson, ed., Sæmundar-Edda (Reyjavík: Sigurdur Kristjánsson, 1905), p. 262. Læsö, a small island in the Kattegat about ten miles from the coast of Danish Jutland, is as sandy as the rest of this rather featureless coastal area. Something more specific than Tuso's suggestion is required.

If Malone is correct (as I believe) in saying that Ecgtheow is a Wylfing and that his feud with Heatholaf arose among his own people then I suggest that the missing alliterative syllable in 461 conveyed something of the primitive wolf sympathy or wolf-kinship of that tribe. And perhaps it was the suggestion of heathen belief that caused the Christian scribe to miscopy the word. G.V. Smithers has pointed out in "The Geats of Beowulf", Durham Univ. Journal, LXIII-2, (1971) 87-103, that names such as Wylfingas and Hundingas belong to "a whole class of ethnic names of 'animal' type which is an ancient one

in the Germanic languages" and which have ". . . animal sympathy expressed in them" (p. 91). Smithers notes that these tribal names may have arisen from a belief in shape-shifting and from the use of animal masks by warriors in battle:

"archaeological evidence for masked warriors is available in the well known seventh-century Swedish bronze die of Torslunda on Öland, and the seventh-century scabbard from Gutenstein in Baden. Both of these depict a figure with human legs, but wearing an animal coat (the head, the skin - i.e. the trunk - and the tail of a creature which is probably a wolf), such as the warriors named ulfheðnar, wolves' skins, in Old Norse did. The Torslunda plate and the designation ulfheðnar incidently show that the OE words here-wulf (Genesis A 2015) heoru-wulf (Exodus 181), and wael-wulf (Battle of Maldon 96) in application to a warrior may well--though perhaps in Anglo-Saxon England, no longer understood in their original connotation--have once expressed the same conception." (pp. 91-92). With this in mind it seems very plausible to me that Beowulf, a monster-queller, a man of super-human strength who (like a berserker) goes into battle in front of Hygelac āna on orde (2498), may be descended through Ecgtheow from a tribe who I suggest should be referred to in 461 as the wergara cyn. It would then perhaps seem even more appropriate for the scop at Heorot to link the story of young Beowulf's exploits with those of Sigemund, who appears later in ON literature as a

famous (wolf) shape-shifter, and who was the founder of the tribe of (W)ylfingas. (Finnur Jónsson, ed., "Volsungakviða en forna:", p. 259).

⁶Malone, "Ecgtheow", in Studies, p. 109.

⁷Irving, p. 17.

⁸A.G. Brodeur, The Art of Beowulf, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1969), pp. 79-87.

⁹Erich Auerbach, Mimesis, trans. W.R. Trask, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1968), p. 3.

¹⁰Homer, Odyssey, trans. E.V. Rieu, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1964), p. 114.

¹¹Ibid., p. 115.

¹²Auerbach, Mimesis, pp. 3-23.

¹³K. Malone, ed. Widsith, (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1962), p. 24.

¹⁴Irving, p. 195.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 61-62

¹⁶Tacitus, On Britain and Germany, trans. H. Mattingly, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1948), p. 112.

¹⁷Joan Blomfield, "The Style and Structure of Beowulf",
Review of English Studies, XIV (1938), p. 396.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 401.

PART II

¹Irving, p. 211.

²Auerbach, p. 23.

³Adrien Bonjour, The Digressions in Beowulf (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1965), p. 30.

⁴Klaeber, p. xii.

⁵Ibid, p. 178. For the story of Andvari's ring see: Margaret Schlauch, trans. Volsungasaga, Ch. XIV ff. (New York: American Scandinavian Foundation, 1949); and, L. M. Hollander, trans. The Poetic Edda (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964).

⁶cf. Bonjour, pp. 38-39, and Irving, pp. 158-9. It would be a mistake to put any emphasis on this minor point. Far more impetus, of course, would be given to the oncoming Swedish attacks by the news that the Geatish troop failed to support their king. Bonjour, on the other hand, sees Wiglaf's sword as "the symbol of the probable enmity between Wiglaf and Eadgils which must have broken out shortly after Beowulf's death" (p. 38).

. . . If we remember that the mere aspect of some 'gomela lāfe', and particularly a sword, was enough to stir up the latent enmity between Danes and Heathobards--the sword

had become indeed the symbol of the triumph of one party over the other--is it too adventurous to assume that the 'ealdsweord etonisc' might probably be called to play a similar part in the Swedish-Geatish feud? This would have been impossible as long as Beowulf lived, but after his death, 'æfter hæleða hryre', what then? Wiglaf himself was to ascend the Geatish throne as heir and testamentary executor to Beowulf, and Wiglaf was the son of Eanmund's 'bana'! Has not the emphasis on the sword tremendous implications in such light?

Now should this interpretation seem to be lacking in a solid basis, or too far-fetched, there is still another argument in support of it in our digression: the poet's comment on Onela's present to Weohstan. Onela gave him the sword, as we have just seen, 'pēah ðe hē his brōðor bearn ābredwade'; yet the actual pregnant words are these: 'nō ymbe ðā fæhðe spræc'. What, I submit, the poet here leaves understood is that there came a time when that 'fæhðe' would not remain as tacit as on this occasion." (pp. 38-9)

The poet, however, who is very specific about the implications of the sword in the outbreak of the Danes' feud with Ingeld and in the renewed clash between Hengest and Finn, makes no specific suggestion that Wiglaf's possession of Eanmundes lāf will bring the Swedes down upon the Geats. Wiglaf's speech to the cowards, on the other hand, puts the blame where it belongs, squarely on them.

⁷Levin L. Schucking, "The Ideal of Kingship in Beowulf," Modern Humanities Research Association Bulletin III (1929), 143-154. Reprinted in Nicholson, pp. 35-50.

⁸Brodeur, p. 87.

⁹Brodeur discusses the degree of free choice in the hero's destiny, op. cit. pp. 182-219.

¹⁰J.R.R. Tolkien, p. 81.

¹¹Tolkien, p. 87-88.

¹²"The Ruin" in W. F. Bolton, op. cit., p. 92. These beautiful lines from the eighth century elegy are thought to have been written by an Anglo-Saxon inspired by the sight of Roman ruins still standing in Britain.

¹³Dr. Knut Stjerna, "Swedes and Geats during the Migration Period," trans., John R. Clark Hall, Essays on Beowulf, (Coventry: pub. for the Viking Club by Curtis and Beamish, 1912), pp. 71-72.

¹⁴Alfred J. Wyatt, ed., "Alfred's Orosius" in An Anglo-Saxon Reader, (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1962), p. 15.

¹⁵Irving, p. 200.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 198.

¹⁷Klaeber, p. lviii.

¹⁸Richmond Lattimore, trans. p. 494.

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 494-6.

²⁰ Auerbach, p. 4.

²¹ Cf. Tennyson,

" . . . I will arise and go
Down into Troy, and ere the stars come forth
Talk with the wild Cassandra, for she says
A fire dances before her, and a sound
Rings ever in her ears of armed men."

Oenone, (257-61)

This quotation is from the edition of Jerome H. Buckley,
ed., Poems of Tennyson, (Boston: The Riverside Press,
1958), p. 38.

²² Tolkien, p. 80.

²³ Auerbach, pp. 12, 17

²⁴ Cf. Irving, p. 234. The hero's grave. . . "is
to be an aid to moral navigation as well. . .
The Geatish sailors on the dark sea of the world
are more than half way along to becoming Spenser's
frankly allegorical voyagers: they will orient
themselves by the name and story of Beowulf."

CONCLUSION

¹John Nist, "Beowulf and the Classical Epics", College English, 24 (1963), 257-262. Nist says that the Old English poet has "a strength of vision and execution, in his finest moments, comparable in no small way to that of Homer". (p. 257).

²Klaeber, p. lvii.

³E.M.W. Tillyard, The English Epic and Its Background, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 71.

⁴See Lattimore, ed., Iliad, I, 120-330, pp. 63-68.

⁵Ibid., p. 165.

⁶Auerbach, p. 6.

⁷Ibid., p. 12.

⁸See Leonard Tennenhouse, "Beowulf and the Sense of History", Bucknell Review, XIX (1971), 137-146.
". . . certain situational patterns repeat themselves through history, but the outcome of the particular event depends on the choices that each participant makes. . . . It is precisely the digressions which create the sense of the critical necessity for the right choice." (p.140).

⁹E.V. Rieu, ed., pp. 38-44.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 43.

¹¹Ibid., pp. 361-363.

¹²Irving says, "Indeed, Wiglaf and the retainers have only a dim existence as characters. . . They exist together in this scene only to dramatize as vividly as possible through their actions the idea of choice: that some may freely choose to run away and that Wiglaf freely chooses to stay." A Reading of Beowulf, p. 155.

¹³Irving does not accept the connection between the Geats' failure to support their king and the downfall of the nation. "The vehemence of Wiglaf's rebuke has led some readers to see it as an important final statement, almost as the "moral" of the poem. It is true that if we wish to take this band of retainers as representative of the Geatish nation as a whole (and perhaps Wiglaf seems to see them in that light), we may be strongly tempted to draw the conclusion that the Geats' own degenerate cowardice will be the immediate cause of all the calamities that lie ahead for them in the near future. But one major difficulty in this is the fact that these retainers now vanish utterly from the poem and we move instead to a larger group of Geats who have been waiting for news of the battle. . . The harsh note of Wiglaf's condemnation is

never directed at them." Irving, Introduction to Beowulf
(Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1969) pp. 89-90.

But there is no reason for Wiglaf to rebuke the other Geats;
they will be the victims of the calamity brought on by the
cowards. If the Geatish cowards are to be treated as in-
dividuals (as Irving suggests) and not as representatives
of the nation then Wiglaf's speech to them would be absurd.
Are we to suppose that the foreign enemies who hear of the
Geats' cowardice will take only the coward's property and leave
the rest of the Geats in peace?

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