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THE CHRISTIANITY OF *BEOWULF*

WILLIAM WHALLON

I

THE agents for the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons are well known.¹ First among them is the sixth-century Irish saint Columba, who founded Iona, from which a later generation extended Christianity to the Thames. The second agent is Augustine (not the Church Father but a namesake), whom in 596 his one-time cell mate Pope Gregory directed to Kent, where a mission flourished as long as the missionary lived but afterwards declined, perhaps owing to the inability or the reluctance of his successors to learn the language of the island. The third and major agent is Aldhelm, who combined the Celtic and the Roman strains of Christianity in his training, under Maeldubh at Malmesbury, and then under the African Hadrian and the Asiatic Greek Theodore, who had both been sent as reinforcements to Canterbury by Pope Vitalian. If *Beowulf*, in spite of its

¹ Bede's account has been admirably adapted by R. H. Hodgkin, *A History of the Anglo-Saxons* (Oxford, 1935), I, 245-355.

mixture of dialectical forms, is thought transcribed in West-Saxon, it appears likely to have been washed in the religious currents created by Aldhelm, who was the greatest apostle in Wessex during the later seventh century and into the time of Bede. But thoroughgoing disagreement persists with regard to the kind of Christianity the epic contains, partly because there is no explicit mention of relics or the mass or the Virgin or Christ Himself, and partly because the funeral pyres and the credence in *wyrd* are remnants of heathenism. The tendency today is toward discovering a high degree of religious sophistication, but it may be possible to demur, as this paper will seek to do, with the suggestion that the epic knows little of Christianity besides two stories from the first nine chapters of Genesis.

The cornerstone to the examination of the Christian elements in *Beowulf* may well be Fr. Klaeber's extensive list of analogues from both Testaments and from the patrology, the hymnology, and the corpus

of Anglo-Saxon religious poetry.² Consequently perceptible in this milieu rather than in isolation, the epic remains largely unique, because it is likely to have owed little direct debt to a library. An oral tradition of storytelling can at least be postulated as having lain behind the epic, since the diction is to some extent formulaic.³ If heathen at one time, the diction underwent conversion, but seems not to have required revision *en gros*. Like the Homeric bard, the creator of *Beowulf* would appear indebted first and foremost to predecessors who composed as he did, upon the same themes and with the same verbal stereotypes.

Beowulf can scarcely be thought to have stabilized a literary language as did the *Divine Comedy* and Luther's translation of the Bible, but the Anglo-Saxon epic poesis was nevertheless influential in an uncommon manner. When the formulaic language became familiar to a wide audience, either by frequent recitation or by preservation in writing, men of letters could with pen in hand appropriate the time-worn phrases developed for impromptu versifying. Cynewulf was such a man: known to have been literate because he signed his works with runic acrostics, he is virtually known to have been a Latinist as well. Yet he used the epic diction because it was the natural means for composing in the vernacular.

The single surviving codex of *Beowulf* is probably the copy of a copy, but the text escaped extensive alteration. Stylists failed to polish the verse so as to provide full alliteration in the *a* half-lines, and clerics failed to cover the traces of heathenism. Originally a transcript from a dictating scop⁴ or the composition of a scop who

had learned the elements of writing, the epic appears in either case an authentic specimen from a large corpus of heroic verse now otherwise almost entirely lost. In scholarship the poet stood somewhere, perhaps midway, between Cynewulf and an illiterate heathen master singer of the early sixth century. He may have known how to write in his mother tongue without being able to read Latin; he may have been orally instructed in Christianity by a missionary without being inclined to pore over hieratic incunabula; and he may have been acquainted with stories from the opening chapters of Genesis but ignorant of the opening chapters of Luke.

Because the poet's obvious references to religious matters are infrequent and elementary, he would appear to have had a slight grasp of Christianity as we understand it, unless he disguised his erudition with characteristic Anglo-Saxon understatement. When he speaks of the arrows of the devil (ll. 1743-44), one may therefore look to a passage in Ephesians, observe that the image was common in medieval sermons, and finally postulate with Klaeber the reinterpretation of an item from pre-Christian folklore,⁵ such as a Germanic counterpart to the sketch of Apollo's shafts from the first book of the *Iliad*. A missionary may have taught the poet only what could be combined with the native heroic ideals, and *Beowulf* may reflect the felicity of the combination. The poet lived in an age of religious transition, but there is no cause for doubting that he thought his world-view consistent and, indeed, enlightened, even though he was aware of only rudiments from "the more general Judeo-Christian tradition which is always the first to be assimilated in a newly converted society."⁶

² "Die christlichen Elemente im Beowulf," *Anglia*, XXXV (1911-12), 111-36, 249-70, 453-83, and XXXVI (1912), 169-99.

³ Francis P. Magoun, Jr., "Oral-Formulaic Character of Anglo-Saxon Narrative Poetry," *Speculum*, XXVIII (1953), 446-67.

⁴ Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, Mass., 1960), p. 200.

⁵ *Anglia*, XXXV, 128.

⁶ Elliott V. K. Dobbie (ed.), *Beowulf and Judith* (New York, 1953), p. lv.

II

Such a thesis will be untenable if *Beowulf* seems receptive to the hermeneutics applied to the Scriptures during the early centuries of our era. Philo extended the exegetical methods of his predecessors and found behind the literal meaning of the Pentateuch a well-developed allegory. His contemporary St. Paul repudiated the rabbinate by expressing the stupendous theological and literary conception that the earlier covenant was important only for prefiguring the later. Paul became convinced God had so ordered the world that the period before and under the law should prepare for the period under grace, not in a general fashion only, but specifically and part for part. Christ was a second Adam, each created in the flesh but each the son of God (see, e.g., Romans 5:14). The Pauline elements of interpretation were thus concrete at both ends: persons and events directly corresponded to persons and events, not to notions brought forward by human intellectualizing.⁷ Patristic commentators subsequently examined the Scriptures in minute detail, often discovering the most enshrouded Philonic allegory or the most elusive affinities between the two Testaments. The school of Antioch believed primarily in the reality of the literal meaning, but the school of Alexandria, in the milieu that had found allegory in the Homeric poems, thought no passage of such simple and self-evident truth that arcana were not to be brought to light. The Latin Fathers, most notably Augustine (the Bishop of Hippo here, not the Archbishop of Canterbury), struck a compromise, but even they were inclined toward reconditeness rather than cogent simplicity. Then to the literal, allegorical,

and typological senses, Cassian added an anagogical sense by combining Philonic ingenuity with Christian eschatology, and the fourfold weave thus manufactured proved durable until the time of Dante and is, in fact, still attractive today.⁸

The husk of *Beowulf* may therefore contain a corn of spiritual nutriment, and the corn may be Philonic allegory (with which anagoge may conveniently be grouped), or Pauline typology, or a hybrid deriving from an adaptation of the patrology itself or of the liturgy. The first of these, allegory as an abstract homily, would be the least edifying but would also be the easiest to discover. Yet the approach of Philo may be rejected out of hand, because traditional formulas, shaped by generations of oral poets, cannot be thought a suitable medium for a permeating second sense in the form of a moral discourse. But the approach of Paul, because of the distinctness in its premises and inferences, remains a strong possibility. Erich Auerbach ventured the opinion that the Germanic and Celtic peoples could be taught the Old Testament only in its typological and not in its literal meaning,⁹ and M. B. McNamee, S.J., has suggested that a few passages in *Beowulf* may show the hero as a type of Christ.¹⁰

The three synoptic gospels agree that during the crucifixion a darkness lasted over the earth from the sixth to the ninth hour, when Jesus gave up the ghost. At the ninth hour too *Beowulf* is still hidden from view in the mere (l. 1600), and his friends waiting on the bank deem that he will return no more. Here may lie an allusion of

⁸ See Charles Donahue, "Patristic Exegesis in the Criticism of Medieval Literature: Summation," *EIE*, 1958-59 (publ. 1960), pp. 61-82.

⁹ "Figura," p. 52. This incidental speculation appears somewhat replaced by Auerbach's later observation that "Christianity has almost no significance at all for the Germanic heroic epic" (*Mimesis*, trans. Willard R. Trask [Princeton, N.J., 1953], p. 111).

¹⁰ "*Beowulf*—an Allegory of Salvation?" *JEGP*, LIX (1960), 190-207. This essay owes and acknowledges a debt to Allen Cabaniss, "*Beowulf* and the Liturgy," *JEGP*, LIV (1955), 195-201.

⁷ Erich Auerbach, "Figura," trans. Ralph Manheim, in Auerbach, *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature* (New York, 1959), pp. 34, 53.

the kind that a traditional diction could express, but there are grounds for dissent. For Beowulf breaks through the waves, with the hilt of the sword and the head of Grendel, and the thanes rejoice to see him. If a type at all in this passage, he is a type of Christ resurrected; and yet he is hardly that either, since his harrowing of the underworld lasted an indefinite term, so that it is unclear whether he rose the third day. The mention of the ninth hour, which upon first reading might be taken as biblical, is probably to be explained by the strong chance that the word *nōn* designated only a basic and approximate point of time.¹¹ We speak of noon more casually than we speak of tierce or sext, and the poet of *Beowulf* may similarly have intended neither the canonical office nor the hour on the cross but merely midday.

Another passage is more suggestive of typology. As the twelfth in a company of warriors Beowulf goes to fight the dragon; the wight who had stolen the cup and brought on the devastation is the thirteenth (ll. 2401–7). The enumeration is so explicit as to be presumed significant, and one is apt to think of Christ, Judas, and the eleven other disciples. In the *Song of Roland* there may possibly be indications of a Christ–Judas relationship,¹² though the betrayer is not one of the Twelve Peers. But in *Beowulf* the correspondence is more complete, and the stolen vessel even answers to the thirty pieces of silver. Yet it is remarkable that little moral blame attaches to the thief. His motive is not base in any important sense; he seems merely unfortunate, not a Judas. But the precise mention that he is the thirteenth in the band ought to be accounted for, since the poet appears to have composed the list with care, and a tradition independent of

the Christian story is inviting: the thief has no luck because thirteen is an unlucky number. Of course, his ill success in gaining his need with impunity preceded rather than followed his position as thirteenth, and the position is therefore indicative rather than causative. Although of hidden origin, the superstition is known to us all and is observed by dictionaries in a number of languages. Modern examples are not difficult to multiply, one of the best coming at the very end of Ibsen's *The Wild Duck*. An early example can perhaps be found in Old Norse: the fragmentary "Shorter Voluspo" inserted in *Hyndluljóth* begins with the statement that the gods were eleven in number after Balder was slain, and if Odin is thought to have been excluded from this group¹³ the fatal thirteen can be made up once more. Christianity is possibly responsible for the superstition but appears more likely only to have strengthened an irrational but persistent item from folklore; we hold thirteen in a group to be unlucky, but we do not think one member will betray another. Virgil considered the seventeenth day a good one for planting the vine, the ninth an aid to the fugitive but an impediment to the thief (*Georgics* I.284–286); and thirteen may be feared through a heritage of similar kind but of singular viability. Its sinister nature cannot be entirely explained, unless mystically, but its being indivisible and immediately successive upon a number with several factors may have been conducive to the notion that one member of the group was supernumerary. To the Anglo-Saxon mind twelve was a round figure, and the poet placed the thief as the thirteenth to emphasize that he was an unlucky man,

¹³ The number of the gods is hard to ascertain. In the twentieth to the thirty-third stanzas of *Gylfaginning*, Snorri declares that the gods are twelve, and then lists the twelve (including Balder) in addition to Odin, and reluctantly admits Loki as a fourteenth. In "Balder Dead" Matthew Arnold holds Odin above and distinct from the twelve other gods, and a concept similar to Arnold's may have lain behind the "Shorter Voluspo."

¹¹ See Dorothy Whitelock, *The Audience of Beowulf* (Oxford, 1958), p. 6.

¹² Auerbach, *Mimesis*, p. 101.

not to suggest that he was perfidious to his master.

The final form of religious profundity, similarity to the Scriptural commentaries or the ceremonies of the church, *Beowulf* will contain *volens volens*. For Augustine, toward the beginning of Book XII of the *Contra Faustum*, discoursed extensively upon the underlying meanings of the story of Cain, and many of the other Fathers did likewise, so that it was and is impossible to mention Cain without potentially invoking the patrology for elucidation. Because the sacraments are palpable representations of spiritual processes, furthermore, many physical activities may be taken as analogous to rites of a higher meaning: baptism is the purification of the soul but is accomplished by the immersion of the body, so that it was and is impossible to engage in heroic endeavor underwater without receiving baptism by a figure of speech. But conservatism would here as elsewhere seem advisable in developing a Christian multivalence from the epic. Many present-day Protestant theologians believe that the Old Testament is most truly seen as fulfilled by the New when each is regarded as a historical and legal whole, not as a collection of curiously significant parts.¹⁴ Without denying the intimate influence the Old Testament had upon the New, they reject as fanciful or bizarre much of both the allegory and the typology from patristic commentary. Regarding the Book of Jonah as a potential influence upon the evangel-

ists, they nevertheless ascribe to coincidence the similarity between the three days in the belly of the great fish and the three days following the crucifixion. The further similarity between Christ in hell and *Beowulf* in the mere is even more likely to be coincidental, since the Anglo-Saxon epic may have been produced under relatively little influence from Scripture or the writings of the Fathers. Long and intricate documents are virtually certain to contain similarities and verbal parallels, and such resemblances as do exist must be searching before they can be named intentional rather than fortuitous: the closing lines of *Beowulf* answer to the close of the *Phaedo*, but the epic hero cannot conceivably be a Germanic Socrates. There would seem no conclusive reason for supposing that the poet was familiar with the interpretive techniques of Paul, Philo, and the Fathers; a fortiori there is no reason for supposing that he wished his own creation to exercise these techniques; and the possibility remains that the Christianity of the epic is naive and rudimentary.

III

This possibility would nevertheless be slight if the poet had the temporal perspective with which he has been credited by several scholars. One believes the epic dominated by a philosophy of history that conjured up monsters and a hero for the sake of passing censure upon a previous, heathen age; accordingly "Beowulf is national integrity, resulting from internal harmony. Grendel and his dam are the Danes' liability to punishment for weakness, pride, and treachery. The dragon is internal discord, a variation upon Grendel, sapping national strength."¹⁵ Another scholar declares in a celebrated lecture that the poet laid his work in a heathen age he

¹⁴ See two essays in *Interpretation*, XII (1958): Brevard S. Childs, "Prophecy and Fulfillment," pp. 259-71, and James N. S. Alexander, "The Interpretation of Scripture in the Ante-Nicene Period," pp. 272-80. Contemporary Roman Catholic exegetes regard the Old Testament as inspired in its literal sense and at times equally but dissimilarly inspired in a typological sense; the degree of sanctity that attaches to certain other senses remains a matter of dispute. The Church credits the Fathers with supreme authority whenever they interpret any text in an identical manner and, for this reason among others, continues to hold the Song of Solomon as eschatological in its primary meaning (see the article "Exegesis" in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* [New York, 1907-12], V, 692-706, esp. 694-96 and 700; see also *Guide to the Bible*, I, published under the direction of A. Robert and A. Tricot, trans. Edward P. Arbez and Martin R. P. McGuire [Paris, 1960], pp. 36, 375).

¹⁵ Arthur E. Du Bois, "The Unity of *Beowulf*," *PMLA*, XLIX (1934), 391.

thought not so much censurable as noble but hopeless.¹⁶ A third believes that the poet deliberately archaized to extol the earlier age by creating a Germanic *Aeneid*,¹⁷ in which the characters know nothing of Christianity but are nonetheless virtuous.¹⁸ A fourth modifies this view to say that the poet showed Beowulf and Hrothgar to be Christians, not because he thought they were, but because his epic audience expected such a religious affiliation from noble men, even of a distant and unchristian past.¹⁹ Though these opinions differ among themselves, in the aggregate they bear strong testimony that the poet possessed a modern sensitivity to historical change. But a further opinion, stated earlier than any of the others, may be preferred over them all: neither the Teutonic nor the Homeric poems "give expression to a consciousness of the antiquity of the events they relate."²⁰ Composed in a traditional language that would perhaps in itself have caused the past to seem less remote, *Beowulf*, like the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, shows the customs, ethics, and religion that the poet shared with his audience.

In the Old-Saxon *Heliand*, Christ is a feudal lord surrounded by a personal entourage, whether the author learned the Christian story orally from clerics or from manuscripts of the New Testament and Tatian;²¹ and the defense of a narrow place against odds, which W. P. Ker designated as the favorite incident of epic,²² is main-

tained in *Genesis A* by Abraham as he exacts revenge upon the horde of Northmen who had destroyed Sodom. In each of these two works the author may have laid aside a scholarly understanding of Christianity for the purpose of making the new religion attractive to minds previously trained by the heroic code; but it would appear equally possible that each author found difficulty in conceiving of a way of life dissimilar from his own. Even in the early sixteenth century Cranach saw the environs about the Judgment of Paris not as the plains of Bronze-Age Troy but as a copse before a Gothic castle on a fjord. The poet of *Beowulf* similarly regarded the Danes, the Swedes, and the Geats of his epic as closely related to him in culture²³ and also as his near contemporaries. To be sure, he thought the action past rather than present, but not in the long ago so much as in a time of uncertain remove. The age in which the men of the epic lived was to the poet neither censurable nor hopeless, nor even heathen; it was his own age, and Beowulf and Hrothgar were to him Christians of his own kind.

In one passage, which is troublesome unless removed by the universal solvent, a surmise of interpolation,²⁴ the Danes do show themselves heathen and hopeless. The minstrel sings in Heorot of the Creation (ll. 90–98); Grendel commences the predations which last twelve years; and the Danes offer vows to idols and a soul-slayer (ll. 175–83).²⁵ Klaeber's textual note succinctly distinguishes between the two most attractive explanations: either the poet forgot that the Danes were to be presented as God-fearing men, or he designated their relapse from Christianity to indicate the duress of the rapine from

¹⁶ J. R. R. Tolkien, "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics," *Proceedings of the British Academy*, XXII (1936), 264. Margaret E. Goldsmith believes that the poet created a pre-Christian setting so as to avoid "the danger of celebrating a pagan hero" ("The Christian Theme of *Beowulf*," *MÆ*, XXIX [1960], 83).

¹⁷ Kemp Malone, "The Old English Period," *A Literary History of England*, ed. Albert C. Baugh (New York, 1948), p. 93.

¹⁸ Malone, "Beowulf," *ES*, XXIX (1948), 162.

¹⁹ Arthur Gilchrist Brodeur, *The Art of Beowulf* (Berkeley, Calif., 1959), p. 206.

²⁰ H. Munro Chadwick, *The Heroic Age* (Cambridge, 1912), p. 243.

²¹ See Friedrich Vogt and Max Koch, *Geschichte der deutschen Literatur* (Leipzig, 1910), I, 34.

²² *Epic and Romance* (London, 1931), pp. 5–6.

²³ See Malone "Beowulf," p. 168.

²⁴ See Whitelock, p. 78.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 21: "A hundred years after Augustine's landing, a king of Kent finds it necessary to legislate against the worship of 'devils.'"

Grendel. The former possibility is admittedly conceivable, but it requires the poet to have altered his viewpoint explicitly within a hundred lines. Though subsequence is not to be equated with consequence, it would appear reasonable that the details emphasized in a single brief narrative compose an intelligible continuum: the Danes joyously worship God, then think they are failed by God, and then revert as a final recourse to rites once performed and not yet forgotten. The Danes are nominally converted but insecure in their faith and not far removed from heathenism.

After Beowulf, a Christian king, has for fifty years ruled over the Geats, they are presumably Christian as well; yet they honor his slain body with a pyre rather than interment. Because the obsequies are favorably recounted, either the poet once more overlooked his original conception, or the Geats of his epic are Christian converts who still find nothing objectionable in conducting the ancient last rites for a singular hero. The former possibility is again conceivable, but its alarming implications are obvious: no other inconsistency in the epic²⁶ is nearly so grave as this postulated religious indifference. A tenable solution is that the poet was accustomed to seeing Christian burial in the earth but nevertheless considered cremation the only suitable end to the career of Beowulf.²⁷ With the exception of the temporary Danish reversion, which the poet appears to have thought intolerable but understandable, the words and deeds of the Danes and the Geats show the kind of religious belief predicable of the poet himself. An elegy upon a previous age is not to be found in *Beowulf*, any more than is a theological multivalence.

²⁶ For a discussion of the inconsistencies see Kenneth Sisam, "Beowulf's Fight with the Dragon," *RES*, N.S. IX (1958), 129-31.

²⁷ For a different view see Whitelock, p. 12.

IV

The song of the minstrel was not, perhaps, a chance selection. Though the account of the Creation is no more important to our present-day concept of Christianity than the Sermon on the Mount, it is easily seen as more useful to an Irish or Roman missionary in a land of swords and burnies. Other biblical episodes, such as *Genesis A* contains, could at length be taught, but the basic sermon for the conversion of heathen Germania may have been the solution to the mystery of how things began. Cædmon found this story the most inspiring part of his faith. Snorri found it the sturdiest stock upon which to graft the genealogy by which, in the Prologue to the Prose *Edda*, Thor becomes identified as Tror, a grandson of Priam in the kingdom known variously as Troy or Turkland. The poet of *Beowulf* tolerated no similar euhemerism, but there are grounds for conjecturing that he anticipated Snorri in transforming the native gods by the opening verses of *Genesis*.

In the Homeric pantheon the only god who has a name understandable by modern etymology, besides the latecomers Ares (the personification of War) and Iris (the Rainbow), is Zeus. The name was not a common noun in historical times and may have been obscure to the epic audience of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, but a Sanscrit cognate permits a derivation from an ancient Indo-European root meaning "daylight." Holding his aegis over Greece, Zeus eventually ruled a very wide territory indeed. In Rome he was called Jupiter, Ju the father, and to the early speakers of our language, which had observed the first consonantal sound shift, he was known as Tiw. Possibly dominating South-Scandinavian heroic song in the fourth century of our era, Tiw may once have commanded the religious respect of such folk-heroes as

Beowulf, but his personality and character cannot be described with certitude, because the spread of Christianity antedated the preservation of extensive written documents among the Germanic peoples. Yet the name alone is a strong indication that he was at least a god of the sky.

In the Homeric poems Zeus received epithets referring to his power over the clouds (*νεφεληγερέτα*), the lightning (*στεροπηγερέτα*), and the thunder (*τερπιχέριαννος*). From him were sent rain, hail, and snow (*Iliad* X.5–6 and XII.278). When harassed by a storm from Poseidon, Odysseus complained not against Poseidon but against Zeus (*Odyssey* V.303–5), and it was Zeus to whom was directed the rebuke admired by Longinus (*On the Sublime* IX.10):

Father Zeus, deliver from the darkness the
sons of the Achaeans ;
Create clear air, and grant that our eyes may
see ;

Slay us, but let it be in the light.

Ζεῦ πάτερ, ἀλλὰ σὺ ῥῦσαι ὑπ' ἡέρος νῆας
Ἀχαιῶν,
ποίησον δ' αἴθρην, δός δ' ὀφθαλμοῖσιν ἰδέσθαι·
ἐν δὲ φάει καὶ ὄλεσσον, ἐπεὶ νύ τοι εὐαδεν
οὕτως

[*Iliad* XVII. 645–7].

Such prerogatives of primacy were not permanent, for the great deity lost his strength in migration to the North and to England. The fourth day of the week, the day of Ju or jeudi, was his by right and should have been called Tuesday, had not Thunor demonstrated his ascendancy. Both Thunor and Woden, furthermore, proved themselves more estimable than Tiw for Anglo-Saxon place names.²⁸ Thunor was a suitable replacement, however, since his name means Thunder or the Thunderer, and Woden, whose name is apparently connected with the Middle English adjective

²⁸ Hodgkin, I, 239.

wood, was possibly associated with meteorological phenomena himself. It would seem that *Beowulf* came from a people who had recently been converted from worshipping gods of the sky, and the epic may permit speculation about how the conversion was accomplished.

The Hebraic name Yahweh is also obscure but has been taken to mean “he blows” or “he makes to fall.”²⁹ Yahweh proclaims Himself through the thunder and the lightning (Ps. 18:13–14), and addresses Job from the whirlwind. Though not localized, though likely to speak through a burning bush (Ex. 3:4), He too manifests Himself most often from the sky. It may even be that Yahweh was associated with Mount Sinai and Zeus with Mount Olympus because the lofty peaks were considered to graze the domain of the clouds and the higher air. In spite of using the title Elohim instead of the name Yahweh, the account of the Creation similarly indicates that God rules from the outermost stretches of space. The proximity of the Germanic and Christian modes of religious thought is nowhere greater than it is here, the indigenous lore possibly nowhere else so receptive to new ideas for old. By a Miltonic transmutation Tiw or Thunor or Woden could become both the *gäst-bona* worshipped in the Danish apostasy (l. 177)³⁰ and the *bona* who, like Apollo, wounds the defenseless with his arrows (l. 1743). For with no alteration of cosmology, the heavens came to be filled by God.

Whatever its original meaning, the Germanic word *god* is used as the ordinary designation for the Christian Deity; the alternative phrases may be regarded as kennings, possibly employed to provide

²⁹ Adolphe Lods, “The Religion of Israel: Origins” in *Record and Revelation*, ed. H. Wheeler Robinson (Oxford, 1938), p. 207. In the same volume see W. O. E. Oesterley, “The Exegesis of the Old Testament,” p. 420.

³⁰ Gregor Sarrazin, “Neue Beowulfstudien,” *Englische Studien*, XLII (1910), 4 (see also Brodeur, p. 188).

for prosodic needs. Some of the kennings are titles of a ruler, and correspond to our *Lord*: of this kind are *Drihten*, *Frēa*, *Metod*, *sē gewæld hafap*, *Waldend*, *Waldend fira* (which answers to the Homeric *ἀναξ ἀνδρῶν*), and *sigora Waldend*. Others show a conception of God as a Lord of the heavens or a Creator: *Kyningwaldor Wuldurcyning*, *heofena Helm*, *rodera Ræ-dend* and *Scyppend*. *Demend* is possibly of either kind: it need not refer to the Last Judgment, but may mean only Arbiter (cf. *dēme* in l. 687), or Deemer, Conceiver. *Wuldres Hyrde* is a combination: since *folces hyrde* is a hackneyed metaphor answering to the Homeric *ποιμην λαῶν*, the *Hyrde* is not necessarily the Shepherd of the Twenty-Third Psalm, but may mean no more than Ruler. *Fæder* need not be a theologically exact reference to the first Person of the Trinity but may be a survival from heathenism, since *father* was an epithet of Odin in Old Norse, and since *Tiw father* would be an exact cognate of *Jupiter* and of the *Ζεῦ πάτερ* in Ajax' appeal for light. The other kennings for God are combinations, or variants formed by the addition of strengthening modifiers: *Anwalda*, *Alwalda*, *Fæder alwalda*, *wuldres Waldend*, *ylda Waldend*, *Ealdmetod*, *sōp Metod*, *sigora Sōpcyning*, *Liffrēa*, *sē Ælmihtiga*, *migtig God* and *migtig Drihten*, *halig God* and *halig Dryhten*, *witig God* and *witig Drihten*, *ēce Drihten*, and *Drihten God*. There is no hint of the Incarnation, and if the expressions as a group have affinities with any single biblical passage, the passage is the story of the Creation.

In the *Iliad* there are certain traces of a primordial fate or destiny that lies behind the power of the gods, and *wyrd* may once have similarly proved compatible with *Tiw*, *Thunor*, and *Woden*. In *Beowulf* it can be averted by God (l. 1056), but unaverted it is tantamount to what must come to pass, and in one instance is virtually an

identifiable remnant of heathenism: *swā unc wyrd getēoð*, *Metod manna gehwæs* (ll. 2526–27). The use of *Metod* here as a kenning for *wyrd* suggests again that some of the kennings for God may have been established in the poetic diction prior to the advent of Christianity—and this possibility is an impediment in the way of those who discover a mature and intricate form of religion behind the epic. Without violence to the text one may find *Beowulf* Christian though replete with heathen carry-overs; one may equally well find it heathen with Christian additions. But a *via media* is perhaps a surer path than either alternative: *Beowulf* is a harmonious and consistent work of an imagination converted to a primitive form of Christianity. The account of the Creation from Genesis might have facilitated the conversion by allowing God to displace the native sky-gods and to demote *wyrd* as a secondary agency. The first of the Scriptural stories which we are certain the poet knew would at least appear to have affected, and perhaps determined, his conception of God.

V

From the Creation story the poet of *Beowulf* may have learned to account for the handsome and pleasant things in the world, to reject as false and ineffectual the native sky-gods, and to understand that the heavens were the domain of God. But only by a supplementary story could he have learned to account for the abhorrent and savage things,³¹ to localize the sky-gods in a foreign place, and to understand the Christian concept of hell. In both the heathen Nordic formulation and the body of dogmata available to the missionary, heaven was the realm of the Most High, hell was the subterranean abode of those dead who failed to enter the realm of the

³¹ See Whitelock, p. 76.

worthy or elect,³² and the world of men was a *middangeard* or locale between heaven and hell. An anecdote told by Gilbert Murray indicates how Christianity in Greece absorbed the cult of Dionysus by reinterpreting its ritual of springtime resurrection; ³³ in Britain Christianity absorbed the indigenous lore by reinterpreting its geography.

The references in *Beowulf* to an afterlife are brief and difficult to assess: one passage (ll. 1002–8, containing the expression *nipða bearna*, which Klaeber believes Christian³⁴) speaks only of how no one can escape fate but all must lie in a prepared place after the feast of life; other passages speak of how soon after death (ll. 2741–42) or late (ll. 977–79 and 3108–9) a man is judged, but by God rather than Christ;³⁵ a further passage (ll. 3082–83) mentions the end of the world but contains no hint of the destruction in Armageddon or the decision in the valley of Jehoshaphat. No complex theology is revealed in the references, no acquaintance with the New Testament, but merely a grasp of Christian elements concordant with the myths of Germanic heathenism. This much is sufficient to permit the epic hero's excellent prediction that hell will be the future residence of Unferth (l. 588).

Hell is in addition the present residence both of Grendel (ll. 101, 788, 852, and 1274) and of certain demons skilled in runes (l. 163); hell is remembered by the Danes in their reversion (l. 179). It is the domain of all evil, and the Scriptural lesson likely to have produced this conception is cited twice: briefly in lines 1261–66 and

more significantly in the lines that immediately follow the song of the Creation:

99 Swā ðā drihtguman drēamum lifdon,
 ēadiglice, oð ðæt ān ongan
 fyrene fre(m)man fēond on helle;
 wæs se grimma gāst Grendel hāten,
 māere mearcstapa, sē þe mōras hēold,
 fen ond fæsten; fifelcynnes eard

105 wonsǣli wer weardode hwile,
 siþðan him Scyppend forscifen hæfde
 in Cāines cynne— þone cwealm gewræc
 ēce Drihten, þæs þe hē Ābel slōg;
 ne gefeah hē þære fāhðe, ac hē hine
 feor forwræc,

110 Metod for þȳ māne mancynne fram.
 Þanon untȳdras ealle onwōcon,
 eotenas ond ylfe ond orcnēas,
 swylce gīgantas þā wið Gode wunnon
 lange þrāge; hē him ðæs lēan forgeald.

By a remote possibility the Hebraic legends concerning the posterity of Cain³⁶ may have been known to the missionary responsible for the Christian elements in *Beowulf*. More probably the missionary himself, accommodating his creed to a new environment, assigned to Cain the ultimate origin of crime and opposition to God. Since the Anglo-Saxon epic diction never became so formulaic as to refuse additions, certain ecclesiastical expressions could be made consonant with the heroic heritage, almost as easily as certain native expressions from the distant past could be turned to a religious purpose in the didactic poems. The missionary's own vocabulary may therefore be thought to appear in this passage: the *forscifen* of line 106 is a coinage from the analogue *proscribere*, and the *gīgantas* of line 113 is a Latinate loan word.³⁷ The *gīgantas* may in fact be traced to the giants in the earth from Gen. 6:4, who are here taken as descendant from Cain and ultimately destroyed by the flood (see

³² Hilda Roderick Ellis, *The Road to Hel* (Cambridge, 1943), pp. 84, 96. See also Klaeber in *Anglia*, XXXV, 268.

³³ Preface to the Third Edition of his *Five Stages of Greek Religion*, p. v in the 1955 Anchor reprint.

³⁴ *Anglia*, XXXV, 467. But patronymics such as *beorn Ecgþeowes* argue against the coinage of *nipða bearn* by analogy with *fili hominum*.

³⁵ See Klaeber in *Anglia*, XXXV, 263.

³⁶ Oliver F. Emerson, "Legends of Cain, Especially in Old and Middle English," *PMLA*, XXI (1906), 878 n.

³⁷ See Whitelock, pp. 5–6.

ll. 1689–90).³⁸ These details the poet referred to as if they formed in his mind a single story.

The similarity of Grendel and his mother to certain Old Norse creatures indicates that they were Germanic commonplaces;³⁹ their relegation to hell was possibly commonplace as well; but their association with the primal guilt of Cain was an adaptation of Christianity for a people who would not believe that the moor, during the blackness of night, was harmless and deserted. The monsters that arise in the dark from their dank and repugnant lairs to roam the earth were not scoffed at as a nightmare of a heathen imagination but were rendered compatible with a more orderly scheme of things, as “new Scripture and old tradition touched and ignited.”⁴⁰ Because the kenning *fēond moncynnes* has a probable connection with the *hostis humani generis* of the Surtees Hymns,⁴¹ Grendel even appears identified with the power of evil elsewhere assigned to the devil himself. The Christian idea of the enemy of mankind affected the nature attributed in *Beowulf* to the ogres that preceded him, but the poet had no greater theological erudition than was necessary for appropriating the language used by a missionary in teaching the story of Cain.

In its use of an established epic diction to couch an apparently traditional content without historical perspective, *Beowulf* more closely resembles the Homeric poems than it does the *Aeneid*. It is also rather an *Odyssey* than an *Iliad*, since in the main it shows heroes facing monsters instead of other heroes. But whether the monsters are all of a spiritual kind is unclear, because of the uncertainty whether the catalogue of

the spawn of hell is exhaustive or merely indicative. The dragon is not explicitly listed and has been thought meticulously excluded,⁴² yet the tone and action of the epic make small separation among Grendel and his dam, the monsters *Beowulf* slew in his contest with Breca, the dragon he slays to his own death, and the dragon slain by Sigemund: “what really counts is that the broad links between the monsters, whether of demoniac or draconic extraction, are of much greater import than the differences.”⁴³ The dragon is a grim and hellish adversary, almost exactly as the famous march-stepper is, and strikes the imagination as belonging to essentially the same race; the two are variants, much as Circe and Calypso are variants in the *Odyssey*. The point once made that the monsters roaming the heath and the fen are the progeny of Cain, the significance of the dragon is by implication clear enough. Side by side with *Beowulf* may be placed the sixth-century *Altus Prosator* generally attributed to Columba, which is, as R. H. Hodgkin has mentioned, a *Dies Irae* from a Celtic soul. A better specimen of the syncretism by which the Anglo-Saxons were converted would be hard to find, for the Lucifer behind the fearful vision is “a monster ready to take the place of the Teutonic dragons which had brought *Beowulf* and the heathen heroes into actions”:⁴⁴

Draco magnus taeterrimus
terribilis et antiquus,
qui fuit serpens lubricus,
sapientior omnibus
bestiis et animantibus
terrae ferocioribus. . . .

This is, of course, not Cain but the devil, and the allusion to the temptation in the

³⁸ Emerson, pp. 888–94.

³⁹ See Charles W. Kennedy, *The Earliest English Poetry* (London, 1943), p. 69.

⁴⁰ Tolkien, p. 269.

⁴¹ James Walter Rankin, “A Study of the Kennings in Anglo-Saxon Poetry,” *JEGP*, IX (1910), 57 (see also Emerson, p. 880, and Klaeber in *Anglia*, XXXV, 251–55).

⁴² Brodeur, pp. 126, 218.

⁴³ Adrien Bonjour, “Monsters Crouching and Critics Rampant,” *PMLA*, LXVIII (1953), 309. This conclusion is supported by a study of several Norse analogues to the episodes of *Beowulf*; G. V. Smithers, *The Making of Beowulf* (Durham, Eng., 1961), pp. 6–12.

⁴⁴ Hodgkin, I, 257.

Garden of Eden speaks of matters unknown to *Beowulf*. Yet the dragon of the epic remains essentially congruous with Grendel and his mother precisely because of a widespread connection with the ultimate source of evil. Although no kenning used for the dragon is adapted for the devil by the Christian poems,⁴⁵ the word *draca* itself frequently held this malignant meaning attached by the Book of Revelation.⁴⁶ With the connotations of *fēond moncynnes*, it was introduced into the language by a missionary and came to serve as an alternative to *wyrm*. By strong implication the dragon in *Beowulf* has the same origin as Grendel, and the reinterpretation of their nature may be a Columban element in the early form of Christianity.⁴⁷

The arrows of pestilence in the first book of the *Iliad* could safely be ascribed to fardarting Apollo even if he were not named in the passage. But the monsters of Germanic lore appear not to have been a characteristic scourge from Tiw, Thunor, or Woden, and all Christian interpretations of *Beowulf* likewise fail to demonstrate that Grendel was a coercive force directed against mankind by God. Neither Hrothgar's pride⁴⁸ nor any Danish custom more honored in the breach than the observance is the instigation of the rapine. The dragon does have a definite motive: he is angered because a cup has been stolen from his hoard by a fugitive in need of treasure with which to effect a reconciliation.⁴⁹ The hoard subsequently appears to lie under a curse, but this detail does not alter the story, since the dragon is as much an embodiment as the curse could require.

⁴⁵ Emerson, p. 882.

⁴⁶ Klaeber in *Anglia*, XXXVI, 189. See Goldsmith, pp. 92-93.

⁴⁷ Following an argument entirely distinct from my own, Charles Donahue similarly concludes that the religious viewpoint is rather Irish than Augustinian ("Beowulf, Ireland and the Natural Good," *Traditio*, VII [1949-51], 263-77).

⁴⁸ See Brodeur, p. 214.

⁴⁹ See Frank Gaylord Hubbard, "The Plundering of the Hoard in *Beowulf*," *Univ. of Wis. Stud. in Lang. and Lit.*, XI (1920), 6-7.

Beowulf is gratified at his death that the treasure will be possessed by the Geatish nation, but he faced the dragon without cupidity, and his fear of having offended God (ll. 2329-31) is by no means justified within the poem. The third episode has much the same significance as the first two, and the dragon may consistently be thought to share with Grendel a lineage that alone explains their hostile monstrosity. Too firmly believed in to be removable as unchristian, the trolls and the fire-drakes were a menace to the missionary unless he could provide them with a biblical basis, such as the fusion of the stories about Cain, the giants, and the Flood into what is in effect a gloss on the story of the Creation.

VI

Even the minor portions of *Beowulf* are dominated by the crime and doom of Cain.⁵⁰ Danish intrigue foretells that Hrothgar's death will be followed by contention for his rule. The Swedish king Onela faces the ethical dilemma of whether or not to reward the slayer of a nephew who had risen in arms against him. The Geatish king Hrethel cannot resolve his sorrow when one of his sons accidentally kills the other. All three royal houses are liable to extinction because each is attenuated by internal discord. But the toughness and cohesion of the epic go even further. Not only is Hæthcyn stigmatized for having slain Herebeald (ll. 2435-40), but Weohstan is guilty of having slain his brother's son (l. 2619), and Unferth faces hell for having slain his *brōðrum*, his *hēafodmægum* (ll. 587-88). Turning from monsters to men the poet is still concerned with fratricide, in the wider sense of the slaying of a near kinsman, and with apparent care causes the epic hero to take

⁵⁰ See William Witherle Lawrence, *Beowulf and Epic Tradition* (Cambridge, Mass., 1928), pp. 71-106.

satisfaction in the thought that the Lord cannot charge him with the *morðorbealo māga* (l. 2742).

Yet *Beowulf* does not proclaim the brotherhood of man or even of the Germanic nations. The hero slew the Frank Dæghrefn (l. 2501), perhaps to avenge Hygelac (as Klaeber suggests in a textual note on the passage), and reckons the deed a sin neither at his last accounting nor anywhere else, but consistently states that such avenging is better for a man than brooding (l. 1385). No retribution other than a punishment on earth is indicated for either Ecgtheow or the fugitive who robs the dragon, although both might be guilty under the decalogue. Wiglaf is glad that he aided not merely a fellow human being but a close relative (l. 2879), and the responsibility of loyalty seems to extend only to the family or the tribe, not so far as to the federation of a tongue. Beowulf and Hrothgar converse with no need of a dragoman, but they are not kinsmen, and Beowulf has come as a friend indebted for the protection once given his father, not as a cousin related by more than sentiment. He is still an outlander, a kinsman of neither Hrothgar nor Dæghrefn.

The epic neither excoriates the traditional ideals nor provides a melancholy commentary on the splendor and hopelessness of a bygone age. The theme of faithfulness to the ties of blood was almost certainly old and unchanged, as was the moral that perfidy to those ties brings damnation. What was new was the perception that the monsters of the moor are allied to the man who slays his kinsman—and this derived from an integration of the heroic code with an early form of Christianity. Domiciled in England by a South-Scandinavian people, the poetic corpus continued to evolve during the sixth and seventh centuries, while the country remained broken into several kingdoms, each

with its throne watched by a council of nominees for the succession.⁵¹ Some of the historical allusions in *Beowulf* to internecine strife may accordingly have promoted effects that we can scarcely experience even vicariously. The poet causes his minstrel to sing of the fight at Finnsburg, in which Hildeburh saw her son and her brother slain as enemies to each other; and directly afterward he introduces the gracious Wealhtheow, for whom he implies that a similar tragedy awaits (l. 1164), as the audience or readers may have known it actually did.⁵² But for the audience the situation was intensified by their having seen among their own people similar feuds with similar outcomes. Contemporaneously with the growth of the poetic corpus and the Anglo-Saxon nation, Christianity became established and provided the political basis of the poetry with yet a deeper significance. By a master-stroke the Finnsburg tale was cast beside the figure of Grendel, the incarnation of violence against kinsmen. The story of Cain, although alluded to only twice in *Beowulf*, became the central issue of the work, and may have been grasped by the audience much as the story about the bondage of the Israelites in Egypt was grasped by the Negro slave in our country.

The poet had no need for the theological background of a Bede. He created a consistent epic by reinterpreting traditional materials to accord with the religious elements crucial to his personal belief. His characters are Christian in the same sense as he was, and their perspective is the same as his, save that they do not see the monsters oppressing them as the descendants of Cain. Some of the audience may themselves have failed previously to realize the implications of this perception, and may

⁵¹ See Hodgkin, I, 208.

⁵² See Lawrence, pp. 126–27.

accordingly have found a striking originality in the epic, as the warning against internal conflict came in familiar matter in a familiar narrative style. Because the monsters and the hero appear handed down from the past, it is hazardous to say that they are allegorical or that they were invented to give point to the poet's philosophy of history. It is easier to say only that old tales were given a new meaning, not different from what they once had, but fuller. The chief interest in the work remains in the hero and the monsters, rather than in any qualities represented or sug-

gested. *Beowulf* is an authentic document from a dark time just beginning to be enlightened by Christianity; it is stark and exciting, not drably homiletic; an adventure, not a sermon. Yet by its religious orientation the work has a coherence not to be found among its early predecessors as we have grounds for conceiving them, and the coherence proceeds from an adaptation of a portion of the Book of Genesis to an age troubled by trolls and dragons.

Washington 8, D.C.