THE WORLD OF BEOWULF

BY JOHN HALVERSON

I

In the first part of Beowulf, Heorot is the center of the world. Almost all movement is focused on it. Grendel seeks it out for destructive purposes; Beowulf comes to cleanse it. All the nobles assemble there; there the King presides and distributes treasure. It shines out over many lands (311), a beacon of civilization; it is the people’s place (“folcstede”—76). For the dwellers on earth it is the foremost building under the heavens (309-310). It towers, “healærna mæst” (78), spacious and gold-adorned (1799 f.), on a high place (285). Lavishly adorned, it is a splendid, shining structure. It is the work of many hands (992); many a people is called upon to decorate the people’s place (74-6): it is the product of social enterprise. It is a place of protection (1037), a place of safety (2075), above all, a place of communal joy, of light, warmth, song, and companionship. The festivities of the hall are suffused with the social pleasures of food and drink and the music of the harp. The queen, adorned with gold, moves among the people, greets them, proffers a cup (612 ff.). There is always the pleasant sound of human voices (“sigefolca sweg”—644).

1 Quotations from Klaeber’s text, Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg (Boston, 1950).
The hall is where treasure is distributed, a function uppermost in Hrothgar’s mind when he builds Heorot (71-2). “Nor did he belie that promise; he distributed bracelets, treasure at the feast” (80-1). Common heiti for Hrothgar (as for kings generally in Old English) denote a giver of treasure; sincgifa, goldgyfa, sinces brytta, beaga brytta, etc. Heorot is not only a monumental artifact, an achievement of homo faber; it is also the center for homo politicus, the place of social joy, music, drinking and feasting, the source of pleasure, where friends and kinsmen are together in peace. The hall embodies all the good things of this world; it represents the principle of harmony: everything is in order.

At the center of the center is the King, Hrothgar. It is his hall: “Hrōðgares ham” (717), “sele Hrōðgares” (826). His presence dominates the assemblies. Petitions are addressed to him, and it is he who makes all decisions. He is the source of food, drink, and treasure. And he is the protector of his people: the most frequent heiti for him are combinations with helm, hleo, hyrde, eodor, and weard, and Hrothgar himself speaks of this role of the king (1769-71). He gives extended advice to Beowulf about the role and duty of the king (1700 ff.), and cites the negative example of Heremod:

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\begin{align*}
\text{breat bolgenmod} & \quad \text{beodgeneatas}, \\
\text{eaxlgesteallan} & \quad \text{oð Pæt he ana hwearf,} \\
\text{mære ðeoden} & \quad \text{mondreamum from.} \\
\text{nallas beagas geaf} & \\
\text{Denum æfter dome;} & \quad \text{dreamleas gebad,} \\
\text{Pæt he ðæs gewinnes} & \quad \text{weorc Prowade,} \\
\text{leodbealo longsum.} & \quad \text{(1713-15)}
\end{align*}
\]

The ruler who abandons his primary duties of protection and liberality becomes a monster, solitary and joyless. He will die and another succeed him who shares treasure, the ancient wealth of earls, without regret, without fear:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{fehð oðr to,} & \\
\text{se ðe unmurnlice} & \quad \text{madmas dælð}, \\
\text{eorles ærgestreon,} & \quad \text{egesan he gymeð.} & \quad \text{(1755-7)}
\end{align*}
\]

Hrothgar, self-evidently, and by Beowulf’s later confirmation, is such a god cyning:

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\begin{align*}
\text{Swa se ðeodkyning} & \quad \text{Peawum lyfde;} \\
\text{nealles ic Pam leanum forloren hæfde,} & \\
\text{mægnes mede,} & \quad \text{ac he me maðmas geaf.} & \quad \text{(9144-6)}
\end{align*}
\]
Expressions such as *after dome* and *beawum lyfde* reveal the basis of the king's prestige in his steadfast adherence to the old customs; he is the guardian of time. The good king maintains his country, his retainers and people, and their traditions; he is the protector, the champion of his people, not their bane. Such a ruler is Hrothgar; so was Offa (1957 ff.); so will Beowulf be.

As the center of the community, the King receives the deference that is his due. Hrothgar's pre-eminence in the court is obvious. The centrality of his position is implied in Beowulf's first approach to him, from sentinel to Heorot to the King's intermediary ("ar ond omiht"—336) to the King himself: Beowulf moves in definite stages from the periphery to the center. Heorot and Hrothgar seen to be identified by Grendel; not only does the demon hate the joyful sounds and appearance of the great hall, but he also carries on a feud with its king: "Grendel wan / hwile wið Hroðgar" (151-2). That Grendel's feud is not personal may be surmised from the fact that Grendel makes no attempt to find the King and kill him.

Even the digression of the swimming contest is directed toward Hrothgar insofar as the conclusion of the episode is his reassurance in Beowulf (608-10). Narrative divisions are often marked by the entrance or exit of Hrothgar or by Beowulf's going to him. Beowulf's journey is completed the moment he is in the King's presence. Their first long interview is closed by Hrothgar's departure (662) and the stage left for Beowulf's encounter with Grendel. The next scene, an interlude before the fight with Grendel's mother, opens with Hrothgar's arrival in state to look at Grendel's arm (920-2) and closes with the King's departure, exactly as before (1236-7). The depredations of the monster follow. Then Beowulf goes to the King (1316-9) and learns the news; the two go off to the mere together (1400-1); when the pool becomes bloody, the King returns home (1601-2); when Beowulf emerges, he goes directly to greet Hrothgar (1644-6). The presence of the King defines the movement of the narrative.

The poet also shows more interest in the state of Hrothgar's emotions—his sorrow and joy, his feelings of confidence, hope and doubt—than in anyone else's.² His opinions, judgments, and feelings are central. His movements and speech are formal, nearly ritual. A courtly protocol is maintained, as we learn at the time

² E.g., 129-31, 147-9, 189-91, etc.
of Beowulf’s first audience when Wulfgar is implicitly commended because “cuþe he duguðe ðeaw” (359). Hrothgar is nearly always surrounded by a retinue: “Hroðgar sæt / eald ond anhar mid his eorla gedriht” (356-7). There is a slight suggestion in these passages of hierarchy, of an incipient differentiation of court and nobility. There is a distinct suggestion of the ceremonial, or ritual, magnification of the king. His movements frequently have such a tone: he goes “tirfæst” or “geatolic” and is accompanied by a splendid retinue. When he speaks, everyone becomes silent (1699).

Hrothgar has some of the numen that in many cultural traditions surrounds the royal person. A particularly striking sequence at the beginning of the poem draws an implicit parallel between Hrothgar as maker and God as creator. The King’s first significant act is the construction of the great hall, for which he “shapes” the name Heorot (“scop him Heort naman”—78). Following almost immediately is the song of the scop about the creation of the world. The Almighty constructed the earth, set out the sun and moon, luminaries as light for dwellers of the land (“gesette sigehreþig sunnan ond monan / leoman to leotha landbuendum”—94-5), and adorned the regions of the earth with branches and leaves, and also shaped life (“ond gefrætwade foldan seeatas / leomum and leafum, lif eac gesceop”—96-7). Heorot is such a luminary (“lixte se leoma ofer landa fela”—311) for the dwellers in the land (“foremærost foldbuendum”—309) and much adorned (“gefrætwod”—992). Indeed, the king as builder and lord of the hall is exactly the extended metaphor for Christ that begins the poem of that name. A similar parallel is implicit when we are told of the giants who fought against God a long time (“gigantas, þa wið Gode wunnon / lange ðrage”—113-4) and shortly after, that Grendel fought against Hrothgar a long time (“Grendel wan / hwile wið Hroðgar”—151-2).

So there are a number of suggestions in the representation of Heorot and Hrothgar of God and his creation. The importance of the assimilation is in the idea of creating or making, which is seen as a God-like act. As God brought form out of chaos, light out of darkness, so the king brings order to his world and maintains it. If the construction of Heorot is conceived as a repetition of the original cosmogonic act,\(^8\) then its destruction by fire would

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596

*The World of “Beowulf”*
correspond closely to the end of the world as envisioned by the Old Norse *Völsunga*, and the death of Hrothgar to that of Othin. The meaningfulness of the center is obvious in *Beowulf*, as it is in all the Old English elegiac literature, particularly in the theme of exile. The lord's hall defines meaningful reality.

II

At the political-social level, the struggle for order is very clear, and the achievement as clearly tenuous. The role of kinship groups in the development of medieval forms of social organization was fundamental; in *Beowulf* the *vinemæg* relationship is the most important of social ties. The solidarity of the kinship group is evident in the obligation of vengeance that fell on the kinsmen of a slain person and the corresponding responsibility for sharing the punishment of a malefactor. This obligation and mutual responsibility were still virtually unquestioned even at the end of the middle ages. The psychological foundation of the *vinemæg* relationship is the nature of the family: its interdependence, its proximity, its "natural" solidarity. If anything was secure and reliable, it was first of all the immediate family. At least one's kinsmen could be trusted. The primary bond of society became *treow*, "good faith, trust," as epitomized by the family tie; the hoped-for result is indicated by the fact that the word *sib* means both "kinship" and "peace." The most edifying personal associations in *Beowulf*, those the hero has with Hrothgar, Hygelac, and Wiglaf, find expression in the family relationship. Wiglaf and Hygelac are both blood relatives to Beowulf, and Hrothgar's highest tribute to the hero is to adopt him as his son (946-9). Besides these admirable examples of the loyalty and love of kinsmen are those illustrating the despised opposite. The prototype is Cain, who slew his own brother (108, 1261-3). Unferth is guilty of the same crime according to both *Beowulf* (587) and the poet (1166-8). Hints are given of treachery to come from Hrothgar's nephew, Hrothulf:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{þæton suhtergæðeran;} & \quad \text{þæt was hiera sib ætgædere,} \\
\text{æghwylc ðrump trywe.} & \quad (1163-5; \text{cf. 1015 ff.)}
\end{align*}
\]

The disruption of that *sib* by Hrothulf's rebellion was to begin the tragic downfall of the Danes.

The war of kinsman against kinsman is a terrible thing. It is one of Beowulf's chief virtues that he never injured kinsmen—or companions. The extension of the social organization of the family and its ethical principles to a larger group, the companions of the hall, is obviously not difficult, especially as relatives proliferate and the distinction between wine and magas becomes blurred. In any event, the organization of the duguβ relies on the same trust as that of the family. The extension is discernible in such terms as sibbegedryht, used twice for Beowulf's followers in the first part of the poem, where there is no indication that they are his kinsmen. Loyalty to the lord is the primary virtue of retainers, but it is conditional on the lord's liberality. His obligation to distribute treasure is cited again and again in Beowulf and in Old English literature generally; just as consistently, the regular form of battlefield exhortation is to remember the gifts of the lord. We hear it not only from Wiglaf, but from Brytnoth's retainers in The Battle of Maldon and even from Satan in Genesis B (409 ff.). Thus the tie between lord and retainers is more formally contractual than that obtaining in the kinship group. The contract eventually develops into the ritual of fealty with its attendant complications, but at this earlier period, duties and responsibilities are relatively simple and immediate. The most striking carry-over from kinship ethics is the duty to revenge a slain lord. A mere contract would terminate with the death of the lord; obligations would cease at that moment. But the ideal of vengeance for the slain earl is everywhere in evidence and a principal source of the drama of The Battle of Maldon and of the Finn episode of Beowulf.

In that passage and in two or three other places in the poem, the final extension of the trust-ethic can be seen, that is, in the relationships between different peoples. At this level formal oaths are required, supported by the giving or exchanging of gifts, including women in political marriages. After the fall of his lord, Hengest swears a truce with Finn, but the duty of vengeance rankles until it can be fulfilled. Hrothgar settles with the Wylfings by sending ancient treasures and receiving oaths (470-9); he looks forward to amity with the Geats, brought about by Beowulf and to be confirmed by the gifts and tokens of love that his ship will take over the sea: the two nations will be strongly allied "after the old fashion" (1855-65). Wealthetheow, it is implied by her designation as "friθusibb folca," was married
to Hrothgar as a peace-pledge of peoples, and her daughter, Freawaru, is similarly allied to Ingeld of the Heathobards in the hope of settling that feud. The purpose of the king’s giving of treasure is quite clear in Hrothgar’s actions and statements: it is the cement of the political structure.

But it is tragically ineffective. An atmosphere of anxiety broods over all the social relationships of Beowulf, familial and political. Justly, for kinsman rises against kinsman, retainer against lord, the lord against his companions; political feud breaks out again after tentative settlement; the Danes will destroy themselves in internecine war, the Geats will be overthrown by their enemies; oaths are broken, the peace-pledges forgotten. Nothing is secure, nothing stable. And Heorot will go up in flames.

III

There are in Beowulf numerous references to, and some detailed description of, artifacts, particularly treasure (Beowulf’s first rewards, the sword in the lair of Grendel’s mother, the jewelry of the queen, etc.). In comparison there is notably little description of nature. What there is is mostly associated with the monsters of the poem, and presents the outside world as cold, dark, and forbidding. We hear often of windy nesses, wastelands, fens, dark and hidden places, and the stormy sea, but rarely of “wuldortorhtan weder” or “fæger foldan bearm” (1136-7). The most compelling and famous descriptions are of the haunts of Grendel and his dam, and of the stormy sea in the Breca episode. When the natural world is the poet’s subject, the emphasis is usually on its grimmer and more hostile aspects: night, coldness, storm, waste. In general it is alien to the people, whose pleasures are associated with the hall, shut off from the world out there. The pleasures of the outdoors are not unknown (cf. 864 ff.), but they have no significant part in the poem. The social world, the civilized world, is distinctly inside.

The hostility of the natural world and its inherently anti-social aspects are embodied in Grendel. He is above all a creature of the night, a walker of the darkness (“sceadugenga”—703), he who bides in darkness (87) and the black nights (167); he is the greatest of the night’s evils (“nihtbealwa mæst”—193). All of his destructive actions are perpetrated at night; during the day Hrothgar and his court safely occupy Heorot. Grendel dwells in

John Halverson
the wasteland, the fens and moors: he is the “mearcstapa, se þe
moras heold / fen ond fæsten” (108-104); he comes “of more”
(710) and goes “on fenhopu” (764). This is evidently normal
for monsters according to the laconic observation of the Cotton
Gnomes that a “Þyrs sceal on fenne gewunian / ana innan lande”
(42-3).5 Grendel too is “an” (100), an “angenga” (165, 449)
who bitterly opposes society:
Swa rixode ond wið rihte wan,
að wið eallum, oð ðæt idel stod
husa selest. (144-6)

He is not only alone, he is alien, an “ellorgast,” a spirit from
elsewhere (807, 1349), as is his mother (1617, 1621). He is de-
prived of joy (721, 1275) like his progenitor Cain, who fled the
joys of men and dwelled in the wasteland (“mandream fleon, /
westen warode”—1264-5). Grendel’s abode is a “wynleas wic”
(821); the mere is in a joyless wood (1416). Moreover, he hates
the joys of men:
Ða se ellengæst earfoðlice
Þrage geðolode, se þe in Þystrum bad,
Þæt he dogora gehwam dream gehyrde
hludne in healle. (86-9)

It is the great hall with its sound of human conviviality that
vexes this monster of the outer darkness and rouses him to
terrible action. He is called enemy of the Danes and of Hrothgar
(146 ff.) and he surely is, but Heorot itself is the target of his
attacks, for Heorot embodies the achievement of civilization; its
size, appearance and prominence seem to flaunt that achievement
in the face of a hostile world. It enrages Grendel, who, living in
solitude, darkness and silence and knowing no joy, embodies the
“fearsome world outside.”

The most terrifying characteristic of Grendel and his dam is
their cannibalism. They are loosely assimilated to the Christian
demonological tradition, but Grendel has his closest analogue in
Glamr of Grettissaga, who is a draugar, a voracious revenant.
Fear of the dead and the fear of being eaten, both primitive
anxieties, are embodied in the draugar and in Grendel and his
mother; they find nearly universal expression in folk mythology.
Such fears arise from the condition of the real world; or if more

5 Blanche Colton Williams, Gnomic Poetry in Anglo-Saxon (New York, 1914).
deeply imbedded in the human psyche, they are at least activated and amplified by the condition of the world.

IV

The contrast and conflict of two worlds—inside and outside, the world of man and the world of monsters, the world of order and the world of chaos—constitute the basic philosophical and psychological structure of Beowulf. On one side is the world enclosed by the walls of Heorot and presided over by Hrothgar. It is a man-made world, its construction requiring cooperative labor, art and technology; in it men speak and act rationally and according to custom; there is about it a sense of material and social form. It is a world that represents the imposition of order and organization on chaotic surroundings. The results of this ordering are (temporarily) security, light and warmth. It is a socially collective world, where the pleasures of human companionship can be enjoyed in the feasting and drinking, in the sharing of treasure, in talking, in the playing of the harp and the reciting of old tales.

The world out there—cold, dark, and cheerless—is dominated by the image of fens and moors haunted by the two monsters, solitary creatures who cannot participate in the joy of the community and who savagely hate its existence. As Hrothgar is a maker, they are destroyers. Because their world is without form, it is without security and without pleasure. It is silent, frightening, monstrous. This is the world represented by the mere when the heralding blast of the trumpet disturbs its watery silence, maddening the monster serpents, who can bear the sound of the horn no more than Grendel the sound of harps.

This polar opposition of worlds is so fundamental that it gives an inevitable, fatal quality to the critical conflict of Beowulf, the struggle between the civilized world and the world out there, which begins with the invasion of Heorot by Grendel. No reason is given for Grendel’s rage against Heorot; it is sudden, gratuitous, and irrational. It would seem (though it is not an obligatory inference) that Grendel has been around for some time; it is the building of Heorot that enrages him and goads him to his depredations. Precisely directed and motivated, his attack is not against the Danes as such but against the great hall, or rather what the hall stands for and makes possible: the establishment of human order with its consequent pleasures. Though he rejoices
in slaughter as he goes to seek his dwelling (124-5), still his motive is not simply dietary, for apparently everyone stays out of Heorot after dark, which seems all that is required to avoid being eaten (138-42). Presumably Grendel could find his victims somewhere besides Heorot, but he doesn’t. His essential purpose, then, must be what in fact he accomplishes: he empties the hall. He breaks down the doors to this little enclosed world, puts out the light, lets in the cold, and, himself the embodiment of chaos, presides in darkness over Heorot, the construct of order.

So too Hrothgar’s constant affliction and woe over twelve years seem to be due as much to this fact as to actual loss of life. His great achievements are being negated by the monster, and not only the Danes suffer but the precarious status of civilization as well. The resolution of this impasse, the “bright remedy” of which the Danes despair, comes from across the sea.

V

When Beowulf hears of Hrothgar’s peril, he takes no thought of his action, but responds instantly (194-201). It is his natural function, as it were, to restore order where it has been upset. The Danes are otherwise nothing to him. Heorot is polluted, the once bright center plunged into darkness, the enclosure of civilization broken down. The atmosphere of the land of the Danes is one of gloom, hopelessness, and stasis; Danish society has been rendered immobile and desperate. In sharpest contrast to this murky atmosphere, the introduction of Beowulf into the poem is accompanied by the flash and rattle of armor, the fresh sea air, the bustle of activity; all that Beowulf and his men do is alive with purpose, direction and hope. As Herbert G. Wright says, “the landing of Beowulf and his followers is the signal for the irradiation of the scene with a flood of brilliant light.” ⁶ The ship is readied, the men chosen and armed. They set sail, quickly cross the sea, and land. Action is all, and directed unswervingly to a single end. It is urgent and purposive. The speed of the voyage, the sea wind, begin immediately to clear the atmosphere (217 ff.). Beowulf’s first announced goal is to seek out the war-king over the sea (199 f.), and his progress is single-mindedly in that direction, straight to the king, and when he is at last in the king’s presence,

⁶“Good and Evil; Light and Darkness; Joy and Sorrow in Beowulf,” R. E. S., n.s., VIII (1957), 5.
he comes instantly to the point. He has heard of the Grendel affair; he would cleanse Heorot, "Heorot fælsian" (432). Again the hall is the center of the narrative structure. Beowulf's role is that of civilization's champion, the hero who restores order when it has been weakened or destroyed. What is wrong in Denmark is not so much that Grendel terrifies the people but that the great hall stands "idel ond unnyt." When Beowulf finally succeeds in destroying the monsters, Heorot once more becomes the center of warmth, light and companionship, and the hero's mission is accomplished.

In the last part of the poem, Beowulf's role is much the same, and the situations and incidents are also parallel to those of the first part. The crisis which the hero is called upon to deal with is the depredation of a solitary monster of the night, now a dragon. Like Grendel's lair, the dragon's barrow is an "uncuð" place. Like Grendel, the dragon hates and humiliates men. Like Grendel, the dragon directs his wrath at the dwellings of men, and his terrors are known far and wide. To Beowulf, again, the crisis is made known (2324; cf. 194-5). His own hall, "bolda selest," is consumed by fire. And like Hrothgar, he is filled with sorrow. But as he had done in the past, he acts instantly and purposefully (2337 ff.; cf. 198 f.).

The pattern of significant events is quite like that of the first part. A monster of the night who embodies all that is hostile and terrifying about the world out there threatens to annihilate the constructed human world of "bright houses." The hero, responding to this crisis with speed and purpose, assumes the role of defender and restorer of civilization. The significant difference is in the outcome of the hero's battle, for in his final struggle against the destructive forces of the world outside, Beowulf is himself destroyed.

VI

The result of the conflict between the constructed, rationalized human world and the chaotic, frightening world out there is not reassuring. The victories of Beowulf are great ones, but they are temporary; the threat remains, and the entire poem is haunted by the vision of ultimate destruction. The life of man and the works of man are fleeting and doomed. The Christian consolation of salvation has no significant part in Beowulf, nor even the
Boethian consolation of the larger view; it is something rather closer to the northern Ragnarök that is implied.

The work of man *par excellence* is Heorot, and in one breath the poet describes its construction and anticipates its ruin.

Sele hlifade

heah ond horngœap; heaðowylma bad,
laðan liges; ne wæs hit lenge ða gen,
Þæt se ecghete aðumsweoran
æfter wælniðe wæcen scolde. (81-5)

It has been justly observed that in the second part of *Beowulf* “there is a constant preoccupation with death.” When Beowulf goes to his final battle, he is sad in spirit and ready for death, his fate very near. He remembers the tragedy of Herebeald, the deaths of Æðhæcyn and Hygelac. Earlier there is the elegy of the last retainer, later Beowulf’s death. The generalization is almost as true for the first part of the poem. The Finn episode is full of death and grief over death. Beowulf goes to both his struggles with the monsters fully conscious of the nearness of death. In his first speech to Hrothgar he outlines in grim detail his possible defeat, and makes an oral will, ending with the Stoic observation “Gæð a wyrd swa hio scel.” He does almost exactly the same thing before he plunges into the mere to fight Grendel’s mother. The climax of Hrothgar’s “sermon” is a *memento mori*. The death of Æschere is dwelled on extensively.

The same fate awaits families, dynasties and nations. The ending of *Beowulf* is dominated not only by the death and funeral of the hero but also by the gloomy expectations of Wiglaf and his messenger: there will be no more receiving of treasure, no more land rights when the far-away princes learn of the death of Beowulf and the “domleasan dæd” of his men (2884 ff.). The elegiac vision of the poem has been eloquently stated by Tolkien: “we look down as if from a visionary height upon the house of man in the valley of the world. A light starts—lixtse leoma ofer land fela—and there is a sound of music; but the outer darkness and its hostile offspring lie ever in wait for the torches to fail and the voices to cease. Grendel is maddened by the sound of harps.”

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604  

*The World of “Beowulf”*
ments of civilization constitute a brave and defiant intrusion of human order into the formlessness of the outside world. But it is a doomed enterprise, for more than a temporary establishment is as yet beyond the capacity of the struggling society represented by the poem.

The same contrast of worlds and a similar pessimism about the endurance of man's works are abundantly evident elsewhere in the body of Old English elegiac and heroic poetry. *The Seafarer, The Ruin, Deor, Maldon* and the *Finnsburg Fragment* maintain this fatalistic atmosphere. *The Wanderer*, with its poignant lament for the lost king, the lost hall, the cruel path of exile, could be a sequel to *Beowulf*: "Swa þes middangeard / ealra dogra gehwam dreosæ ond fealle?" (62-3).

The prevalence of such an attitude is not fortuitous; it reflects a state of mind and conditions of life behind the poetry. For whether we refer to the approximately sixth-century background of *Beowulf* (the time of the historical Hygelac) or the approximately eighth-century milieu of the writing down of the poem, we have to do with a production of the northern Dark Ages. In the earlier period, it is hardly necessary to demonstrate the wretched and precarious state of civilization. As for the eighth-century English background, much as may be said admiringly of the cultural efflorescences of Northumbria and Mercia, their "brilliance" is highly relative. The age of Bede and Boniface was also the age of Æthelbald, barbarian and dissolute tyrant, murdered by his own bodyguard. The learning of the period was a matter of Latin scholarship and theological commentary, not knowledge of the external world. The evidence of the gnomic sayings, spells, saints' lives and the chronicles points to a prevalence of credulousness and superstition and fear. How could it be otherwise? Every burgeoning of civilized life had to contend not only with the encroachment and resistance of nature but also with human destructiveness. It was an age of violence. Boniface was murdered by heathens. Bede's monastery, and the entire northern culture, were annihilated in a moment. It would be surprising, under such circumstances, to find much optimism about the durability of the works of man or much skepticism about the supernatural.

The pathos of much Old English poetry, especially *Beowulf*, is based on themes of isolation, exile, and the dissolution of social order. The prophecies at the end of *Beowulf* concern the

*John Halverson*
break-up of Geatish society. There is a recurring sense of yearning for social stability and material durability: a dynasty that will not be destroyed by feud and war, a hall that will not be consumed by fire or ravaged by monsters. The way to stability, the poem seems ultimately to suggest, is through closer social ties and greater common effort. This is implicit in the treow-ethnic, but conflicts with heroic individualism.

The old social ideals are all reaffirmed in the end, though the responsibilities of Beowulf as a king are not altogether the same as his duties as a warrior. When he learns of the dragon’s visitation, Beowulf at first guiltily fears having gone “ofer ealde riht.” What this “ancient law” comprises becomes clear in his dying apologia:

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\begin{align*}
  & \text{Ic on earde bad} \\
  & \text{mælgesceafte, heold min tela,} \\
  & \text{ne sohte searoniðas, ne me swor fela} \\
  & \text{aða on unriht. Ic ðæs ealles mæg} \\
  & \text{feorhbennum seoc gefean habban;} \\
  & \text{forðam me witan ne ðearf Waldend fira} \\
  & \text{morðorbealo maga, Ponne min sceacð} \\
  & \text{lif of lice.} \quad (2736-43)
\end{align*}
\]

He has not transgressed the old law, then; he has lived up to the code, protecting his people, true to his oaths, faithful to his kinsmen. His fame secure, he can die content. That the traditional contractual obligations take precedence even over the lord’s commands is a direct implication of the contrasting actions of Wiglaf and the other retainers. They had all been expressly forbidden by Beowulf to take part in the struggle (2529-35). Nevertheless, when in spite of this order Wiglaf comes to Beowulf’s aid, the poet commends him: “swylc sceolde sceg wesan” (2708). Likewise, Wiglaf’s denunciation of the deserters (2684-91) is presented as just, though they “only obeyed orders.” It is the poet who calls them “treowlogan,” beliers of their trust. Wiglaf recalls the obligation imposed by Beowulf’s liberality; in return for his gifts it was their duty to support him at need. But he threw away his gifts on them. Once more the importance—and weakness—of treow as the foundation of social order is demonstrated.

Wiglaf also makes a bold, but just, criticism of Beowulf himself:
We recall that Hygelac had long before tried to dissuade Beowulf from the Grendel adventure, but then Beowulf was not a king. His death would have been an enormous personal loss, but it would not have meant the disintegration of the Geatish nation, as it does now. The king has greater responsibility than the warrior. Wiglaf, by his implicit modification of the heroic ideal of purely individual action, hints at the idea of the precedence of the group and the office over the individual, and thus looks forward to a redefined relationship between hero and community that emerges later in the middle ages.

The Dark Ages period is an heroic age, the time of the individual hero. Everything depends on "the will of one man." In the west, the order and culture of civilization are moments of history associated with single powerful men: Clovis, Offa, Penda, Charlemagne, Alfred. Their kingdoms rise, flourish briefly, and decline with the deaths of their creators. When we speak of civilization in this period, we speak of one or two generations only. It is the great men who, by force of personality and military capacity, alone keep together the fabric of civilization, and when they die the order they have established soon disintegrates. Inevitably perhaps, for the kingdom is an extension of a personality, the king an extension of the father. He carves out a patrimony, the realm is private property. But durable order depends on depersonalization, that is, on the establishment of institutions; and the Dark Ages suffer from an excess of individualism. In an altogether personalistic era, the center of order is conceivable only as a person. One cannot yet say, "The king is dead, long live the king," but only, "Beowulf is dead—what will happen now?" The abstractions "king," "state" have not yet taken on a life of their own.

Old English poetry is infused with a sense of mortality and mutability. There was no lack of awareness that life is short and hard. But there is also, as a kind of compensation, a naive cherishing of artifacts: the old treasures that survive through time and can be handed down across the generations. The supreme artifact is the house of man, Heorot, where the world's
vicissitudes are transcended in a moment of human collectivity. But it is a dream. The monsters of the night invade the hall, the dragon seizes the treasure. If the hero restores the hall and treasure, it is only for the moment, for his time.

Men had learned to create order, but not how to make it last. The only way to do that is by common effort. The church had the vision of a united Christendom, but no independent capacity to realize it. Monasticism, moreover, was the dominant form of religious life; and with its mood of contemptus mundi and, before Cluny, its centrifugal organization, it was not moving in the direction of social unity. Secular society, however, was taking the first steps towards such a goal in the extension of kinship loyalties to larger groups, the beginnings of feudal contractualism. One of the weaknesses of early feudalism comes from its source in the family: it remains personal and individual; loyalty is owed to a man, not to an office or institution.

The code of loyalty, personal or impersonal, is implicitly and potentially a means toward social unity; it expresses the intent of cooperation. Why does it fail? Because of individualism. The "cowardice" of the retainers is simply an expression of the priority of the individual over the group. Wiglaf seems dimly to see the dilemma, the glory and the curse of individualism. The retainers were not legally culpable for not coming to Beowulf's aid; they did only what they were told to do. Yet Wiglaf's denunciation and his evocation of the loyalty code are right, for the saving of their society requires the cooperative effort that the code contemplates. He also sees the limitations of individual heroism. Beowulf, the greatest of heroes, is loved and revered by his nephew, but the heroic solution is not always the best solution. It is not Beowulf's pride that brings about the ultimate catastrophe, but precisely his heroism. He is not a victim of ego inflation; he simply cannot see other alternatives to his own way. He is a victim of the heroic milieu; he is molded gloriously and inflexibly by his world.

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608 The World of "Beowulf"